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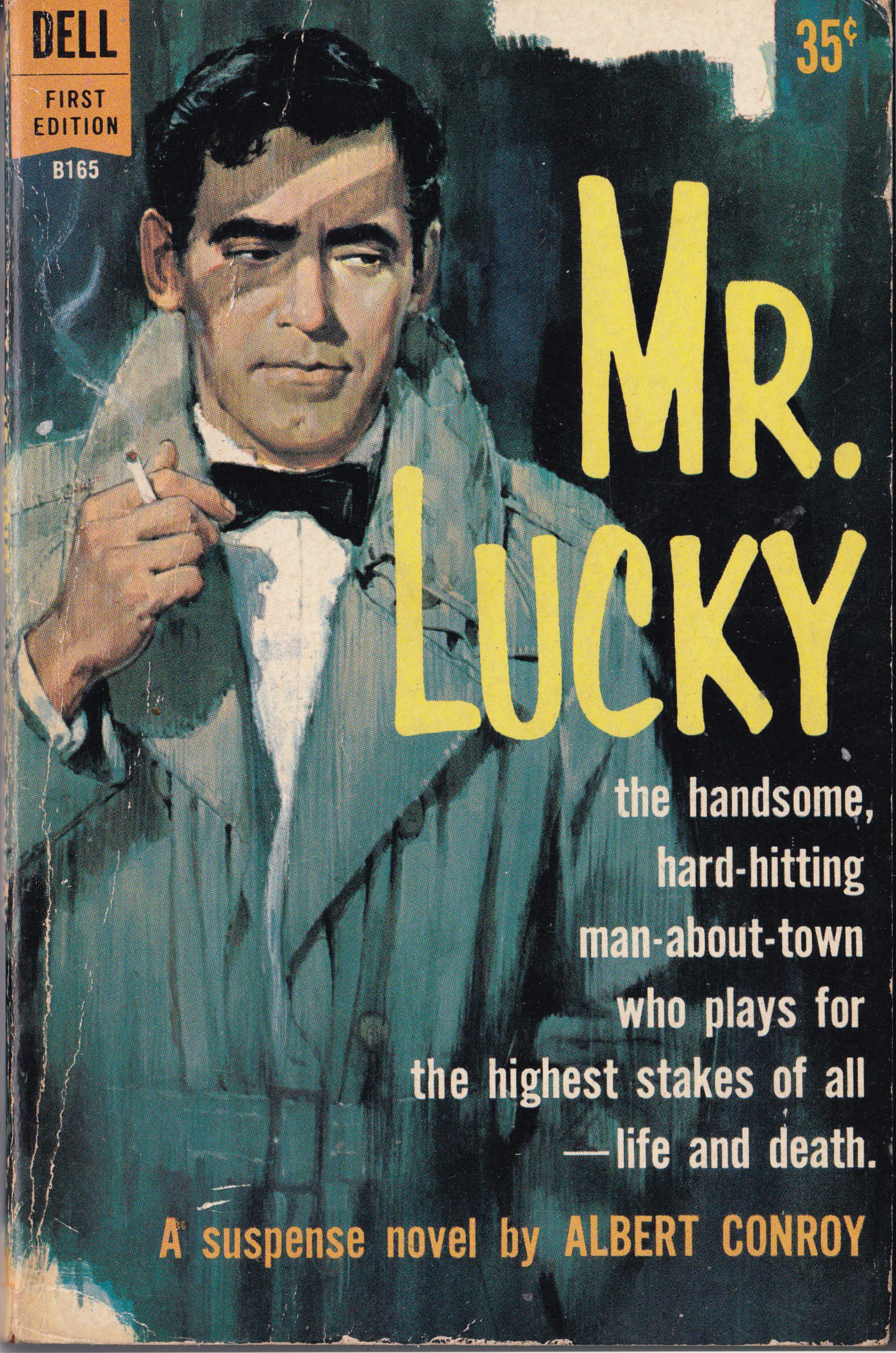

MR. LUCKY

the handsome,
hard-hitting
man-about-town
who plays for
the highest stakes of all
—life and death.

A suspense novel by **ALBERT CONROY**

FRAMED LIKE A PICTURE

Even Mr. Lucky had to admit it was a beautiful nailing job, and he was holding the marker for a one-way ticket to the gas chamber.

It all began when he picked up a gorgeous girl wearing a big smile and a small bikini. She seemed very friendly indeed and she was—with hoods, gunsels and ex-cons. From then on, Mr. Lucky was their target for tonight and, just for laughs, they hung a murder rap on him, too. Naturally, this caused a certain amount of interest in police circles and Mr. Lucky found himself wanted in a big way.

Gone were the golden days of being the genial host on his luxury yacht, the **Fortuna.** Gone were the after-hours card games with Andamo.

It looked as if Mr. Lucky had been born under the sign of trouble after all. . . .

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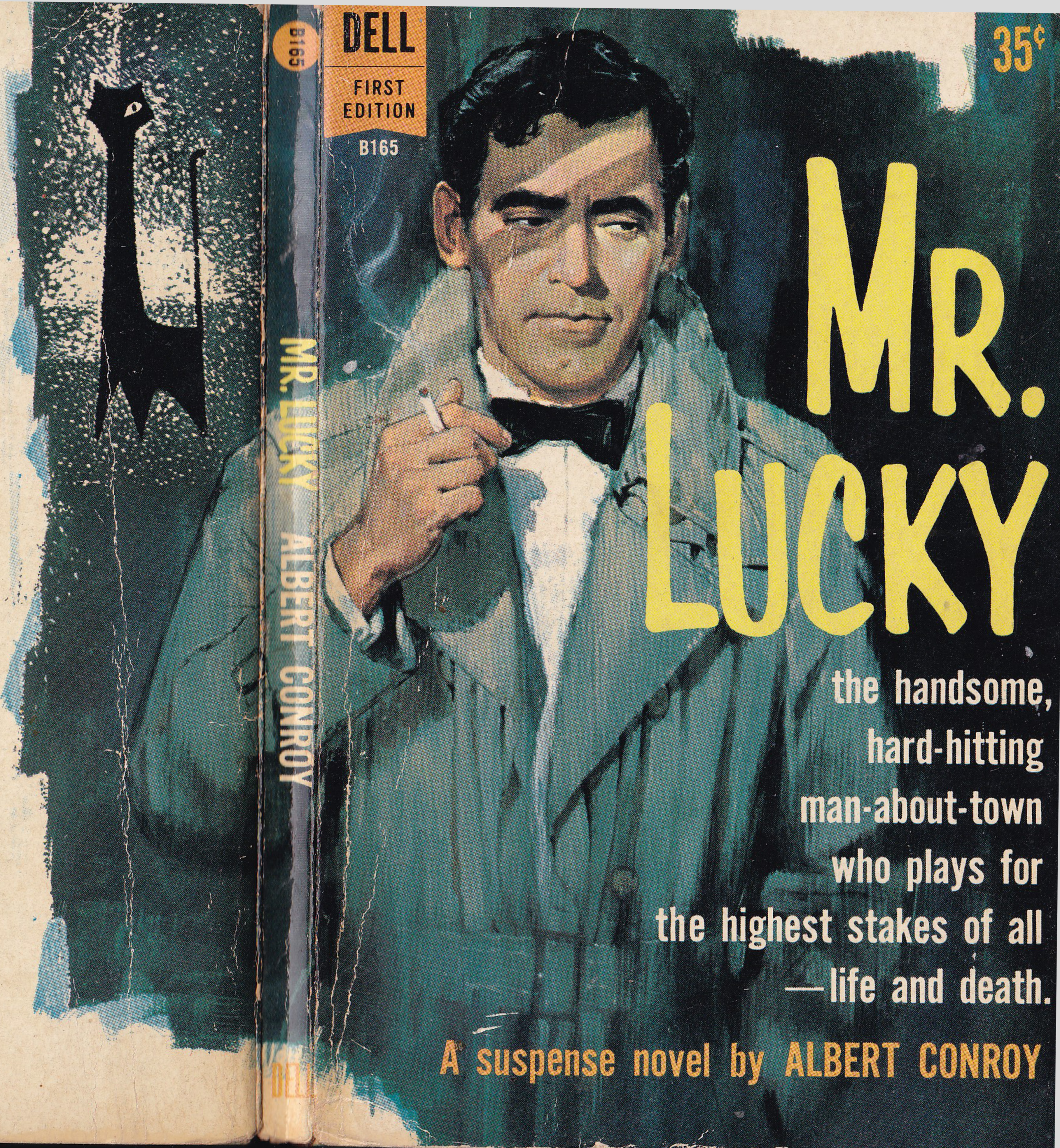

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A suspense novel by ALBERT CONROY

you're in luck
here's MR. LUCKY

The gambler turned gentleman.
The debonair dealer who's secretly in
love with a dame called fortune.
The guy who's a Beau Brummell about the cut
of his dinner jacket when all he used to
worry about was the cut of the cards.
It's as sure as shooting—dice, that is
—that Mr. Lucky's ship has come in.

But don't make the mistake of
thinking he's turned soft. When the
chips are really down, Mr. Lucky's a hard
guy to beat to the draw.

Mr. Lucky

by ALBERT CONROY

A suspense novel

A DELL FIRST EDITION

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1

Mr. Lucky was particularly happy as he drove north out of Mexico. Getting his hands on a good chunk of loot always put him in a good frame of mind, and the fact that this specific chunk of loot was his by rights—and long overdue—made him feel even better. Almost virtuous.

A gambler named Moran had owed Lucky eight thousand dollars, a debt that dated from Lucky's less respectable days. But the fact that Lucky was no longer a professional gambler did not make him regard any more lightly Moran's welshing on the bet and doing a vanishing act. Reformation has its limits.

A few days before he'd gotten a tip about Moran being down in Mexico. So Lucky had driven down with his partner, Andamo, found Moran, and persuaded him to cough up the eight grand. The snub-nosed .32 that Andamo wore under his arm had proved very persuasive indeed.

Andamo, a small, wiry and cynically good-humored Latin who was often somewhat wistful about their bad-old-days, had enjoyed himself hugely. He'd made quite a production of unbuttoning his sport jacket and hooking his thumbs in his belt so the gun showed. The performance had certainly fascinated Moran, and it had ended abruptly his pleas about being broke. So Lucky was feeling particularly fine as he drove back to the States with the thick wad of bills bulging his wallet and Andamo relaxing beside him trying to whistle the latest hit rock-'n'-roll horror.

Suddenly, up the road, a man jumped onto the highway, waving both hands at them. He was a short, skinny character wearing a cheap summer suit and a straw hat with a scarlet band. Behind him, under a weather-beaten tree between the road and the empty stretch of rocky beach, stood an old Ford sedan.

Lucky slowed and swung across the deserted road toward the skinny man. Andamo frowned and murmured, "Let's take it easy. Could be Moran phoned a friend up in Agua Caliente to hijack his cash back off us."

Lucky shook his head. "He'd have had to call more than one friend to do the job."

But Andamo's dark eyes flicked to the rocks near the beach and the dusty clay slopes on their right; he sat up straighter, no longer relaxed. Lucky had the rakish self-assurance of a man with faith in his own luck—the luck that for much of his life had been his stock-in-trade. Andamo always felt keenly his obligation to save Lucky from his own over-optimism.

Lucky eased his convertible off the road behind the man and braked to a stop. "Trouble?" he asked with an easygoing, slightly sardonic smile.

The man nodded. "Damn car won't go." His big-nosed, scrawny face tightened with anger. "I rented it from a garage in Agua Caliente. They must have slipped me a lemon. Got me down here all right, but now I can't get it to start up again."

Lucky climbed out of the convertible, his big, rangy, powerful figure towering over the little man. "Perhaps you're out of gas."

Andamo slipped out of the other side of the car and stayed there, not taking his eyes from the skinny little man.

The man shook his head. "I checked. The tank's almost full." Hesitating briefly, he looked up speculatively at the big man with the smooth, polished manner. Despite this guy's size, he decided he looked pleasant enough. And the smaller, dark-faced one was smiling innocently at him. Besides, they'd been coming up from the south. Nothing to worry about with these two. The ones he had to fear would have been coming down from the north.

"I'm sure glad," he said after the moment's thought, "you turned out to be American. I can't talk Mex. And I got to get back to Agua Caliente. My girl friend's waiting there for me."

"Get back behind your wheel and we'll give you a push," Lucky told him.

"Thanks." The skinny little man gave him a tight-lipped smile and held out his hand. "By the way, my name's Mort."

Lucky shook the hand. He did it with restraint;

Mort's bones felt fragile. Mort hurried to his Ford as Lucky slid back behind the wheel of the convertible.

Andamo got in beside Lucky. "He's wearing iron," he said softly. "Shoulder holster."

"I noticed. See what decent tailoring will do for you? *Yours* doesn't show."

"His gun's bigger than mine, from the bulge it makes. Big guns mean big trouble, Lucky. You really gonna give him a tow?"

Lucky edged the convertible toward the Ford. "You've been complaining about things being too dull lately, Andamo. Just trying to relieve you of your boredom."

Andamo sighed and shut his mouth. He watched warily when Lucky bumped the car against the back of the stalled Ford.

"I sure appreciate this," Mort called back to Lucky. "You two sightseeing down here or something?"

Lucky nodded, meaninglessly, and Mort took it as an affirmative answer. "Know this garage on the south edge of Agua Caliente?" He described its location.

"We'll find it," Lucky told him. "Try getting your car started once we've got it rolling."

Mort tried. Several times along the road to Agua Caliente they heard him working the ignition. But from the sound of it, the battery was dead; the motor wouldn't turn over.

Lucky pulled up to the garage on the edge of town. Mort climbed out of the Ford and asked, "You mind waitin' a minute and then dropping me off at the motel where my girl friend's waiting?"

"Be glad to," Lucky told him. He watched Mort haul something out of the Ford's trunk: tanks, face mask, fins—Scuba diving equipment. "Been skin-diving down there?" he asked idly.

Mort looked at him sharply, suspiciously. But what he saw in Lucky's face washed his suspicion away. "Yeah. Rented the stuff from that place next door there. Went diving for seashells. Water was kinda cold, though."

Lucky got back behind the wheel, watched Mort lug the Scuba gear into a sporting-goods store beside the garage. Mort, whatever he was, didn't strike Lucky as the shell-collector type.

Mort came out of the store, hurried into the garage. As he came out and got his small canvas beach bag from the Ford, Andamo shoved over closer to Lucky. Mort squeezed into the front seat with them, shut the door.

"You guys ain't by any chance heading back across the border to California, are you?" he asked.

"Matter of fact," Lucky said, "yes."

Andamo stared straight ahead through the windshield, exasperated. He'd been about to say no.

The thought had come to Mort while he was in the garage: If there were any rough characters on the lookout for him north of here, riding in this car with these guys would give him a certain amount of camouflage.

"You done a lot for me already," he said, forcing his most pleasant and humble smile. "So I'm gonna be real nervy and ask you if you mind taking a couple passengers along with you?"

Lucky looked at him. "I don't mind extra company," he said. He reached across Andamo, slid his hand under Mort's lapel with a gambler's sureness of movement, and deftly removed the .45 automatic from Mort's shoulder holster. "But not company that's heeled."

Mort gaped at him. It had happened so swiftly and smoothly that his automatic lay in the big man's hand before Mort realized what was going on.

Lucky weighed the gun in his open palm, meeting Mort's eyes calmly. "You can have this back when I let you off. Of course, if you'd prefer to get out now, you can have it back now."

Mort struggled with his fears, finally assured himself that if these two men were intending him harm, they wouldn't be offering him his gun back, and shrugged. "Keep it, if it worries you. I just brought it along for protection. I heard there's lots of stickups go on down here."

"I understand," Lucky said.

"Oh, sure . . ." Andamo muttered, mostly to himself. "We are most understanding people."

Lucky removed the cartridge clip from the automatic, slipped it in the left-hand pocket of his jacket, the gun in the other pocket. He let out the brake and pulled away from the curb.

"You should've heard me tell that bum in the garage what I thought of him," Mort said after giving directions to the motel. "Renting me a lemon like that. I gave him hell."

"I'll bet you did," Lucky said. "By the way, haven't you forgotten the seashells?"

Mort frowned. "Seashells?"

"The ones you were diving for."

Mort tried to figure out whether he was being kidded, but Lucky's poker face told him nothing. "I didn't get any," he said finally. "Like I told you, the water was too cold. I didn't stay in long enough."

Andamo began whistling softly to himself as he folded his arms across his chest. That brought his right hand close to the .32 that didn't show under his neatly tailored jacket.

The motel was next to a gambling casino near the beach. It was a low, modern structure built in the form of a U around a patio, garden and swimming pool. Lucky pulled into the driveway beside the patio.

"That's her," Mort said proudly, pointing. "Fan. Up on that diving board."

Lucky looked, and experienced a distinct jolt of pure pleasure. Beside him, Andamo sat up straighter and opened his dark eyes wider. The girl balancing on the end of the diving board was a downright delicious young creature, wearing a white swimming cap and white bikini that set off the golden tan of her slim, vibrantly curved figure. They watched her bounce up and down on the board and take off in a flawlessly controlled dive that hardly made a splash as she knifed into the water.

Mort got out of the car. "We won't take long," he said, and hurried toward the pool as the girl, Fan, climbed out. He spoke to her as she stripped off her cap, releasing a mass of dark red hair. She turned slightly and looked toward the convertible, smiled. Her teeth were very white in the tan of her face.

Lucky and Andamo watched the two of them stride away around the pool. "What," grumbled Andamo resentfully, "does he have to get a woman like *that?* He is not pretty. And he does not look rich."

"Maybe he's an eccentric millionaire who likes buying his clothes cheap."

"With a forty-five in a shoulder holster?"

Lucky drew from his pocket a silver dollar, flipped it with his thumb, caught it on his palm, heads up. He flipped the coin again, this time so that it hit his palm tails up. It was one of the first tricks he'd ever learned, and it no longer required much of his concentration to accomplish it. He went on flipping the silver dollar, alternating heads and tails, as he gazed thoughtfully at the motel cabin into which Mort and the redhead had disappeared.

As soon as they closed the door of their motel room behind them, Fan turned to Mort anxiously. "I'm glad you finally got back, honey. I was getting so worried, waiting." She patted his scrawny cheek with her wet hand. "You really should have taken me with you, wherever you went. Don't you trust me?"

"I trust you," he told her dryly. "As much as I trust anybody."

She didn't get angry. "Did you find it? Was it all still there, wherever you left it?"

"It was there. Look." Mort reached into his pocket, brought out his hand, clenched. When he opened his thin fist, there was a large, beautifully cut ruby sparkling on his palm.

Fan gasped at the beauty of it.

Mort grinned at her reaction. "Nice, huh? Hooking up with me was the smartest thing you ever did in your life, kid. We're gonna be in clover when I make the sale."

"Where have you got the rest of it?"

Instead of answering, Mort told her, "Hurry up and get dressed. Those characters won't wait out there forever. Even after getting a look at you."

She patted his cheek again fondly, as he slipped the ruby back in his pocket. "I'll hurry. You'd better get back out there and make sure they don't decide to take off without us. I've already packed your things."

She waited till he was gone, carrying his suitcase across the motel patio toward the convertible. Then she hurried to the phone, picked it up and put through a call.

"This is Fan," she said when a voice answered at the other end. "Mort's back. With the rocks. We'll be heading out in ten minutes, in a car with a couple of men. . . . No, they're just a couple of tourists Mort met. . . ." Quickly, she described Lucky's convertible. "We should be easy to spot. . . . There won't *be* any need for shooting. I told you. I'll make sure Mort doesn't get a chance to pull that gun of his. You all just make sure you do your end of it right."

She slammed the phone down nervously, hurriedly stripped off the bikini. She was frightened, but it would all be over within an hour.

2

Lucky had supposed that for a woman a quick change usually meant a long wait. But Fan emerged from the motel within five minutes. Carrying her overnight bag, she strode across the patio toward them, looking pert and pretty in a black pleated skirt, white blouse and high heels that emphasized her trim ankles. She'd tied her mane of red hair back in a ponytail that exposed the firm, cleancut features of her bold, saucy face. As she got into the back seat with Mort, Lucky and Andamo looked at her with open admiration and she smiled back at them without a trace of self-consciousness.

Lucky started the convertible and pulled away, drove north out of the city toward the border.

"It certainly is decent of you to give us a lift like this," Fan said. "I hate traveling by bus."

Andamo turned and flashed her his best romantic smile. "Our pleasure, I assure you."

She accepted the compliment with a soft laugh, finding herself liking him instantly. She only hoped that Bruno and his men stuck to their agreement—that there would be no shooting. Her eyes strayed to the tall, wide-shouldered driver. "Are you two both from Los Angeles?"

"At the moment," Andamo told her.

"Down here on a holiday?"

Andamo smiled faintly. "A business trip."

"Oh? What is your business, if I'm not prying?"

Lucky answered dryly, "We run a saloon."

Andamo give him a hurt look. "Please, Lucky . . ." He looked back to Fan. "A *night club*. A very nice night club. I am the maitre d, among other things."

"Small world. I used to work in a night club on the Strip. Chorus girl. I thought I was going to be another Cyd Charisse. But . . ." She made a rueful face. "No talent."

"You are lovely and charming," Andamo told her gallantly. "For a woman, this is the greatest talent."

Lucky concentrated on his driving, only half listening. Mort sat silently brooding.

They were on a narrow, twisting stretch of road below Tijuana where the hills sloped up steeply from either side, when a black Cadillac sedan pulled out from behind a boulder just ahead of them. It cut straight across the road and jolted to a stop in the middle, broadside to the oncoming convertible, and blocking the road. From the back window a Thompson submachine gun was pointed at them. At the same time a stocky man stood up behind some wild bushes growing out of the sandy left shoulder of the road, a long-barreled revolver ready in his hand.

Mort went rigid, his scrawny face contorting with the shock of terror. Beside him, Fan reacted instantly with a shriek of pretended fright. She threw her arms tightly around Mort—which would have effectively prevented him from drawing his .45 if he'd still had it.

But Andamo had his snub-nosed .32. And he had it out in his fist in the same split second that Lucky twisted the wheel of the convertible and jammed the accelerator down to the floorboards—both of them reacting to the sudden roadblock as abruptly as Fan, though she'd been expecting it and they hadn't.

The tires shrieked as the convertible shot off the road onto the soft sand beside it. Lucky twisted the wheel back and hurtled his convertible through the narrow gap between the front of the Cadillac and the side of the hill on his left, aiming straight at the bushes and the gun-wielder behind them. The tires spun in the sand, got traction and leaped forward. The stocky man yelled with stunned alarm as he saw the car coming head-on at him and, forgetting the gun in his hand, hurled himself wildly at the slope of the hill and clung to it desperately.

The convertible missed him by inches, crushing the bushes flat. Lucky twisted the wheel again, his foot keeping the accelerator jammed down as far as it could go, as the convertible skidded in the sand then shot back onto the paved road on the other side of the black Cadillac.

The machine-gunner in the rear of the Cadillac switched sides and poked the tommy gun through the other window to fire a low burst at the convertible's rear tires. But Andamo was already turned around in the seat beside Lucky, lining up the sights of his .32 as he braced his right wrist with his left hand to steady his aim against the motion of the speeding car. He squeezed the trigger three times in rapid succession, the sharp reports of the cartridges blending into each other. The machine-gunner screamed and dropped the tommy gun, clutched at his shoulder and fell back inside the Cadillac.

The stocky man at the side of the road was up on his feet, taking aim. Andamo threw two wild shots at him and the slugs tore gouts of clay out of the slope above the gunman's head and sent him scurrying for cover.

Seconds later a sharp bend in the road hid the Cadillac from sight behind them, but Lucky didn't ease up his pressure on the accelerator. The convertible roared away from the ambush with the speedometer needle quivering at ninety-five.

In the back seat, Fan shakily let go of Mort and rasped, "What in the world was *that* all about?"

Andamo squinted at Mort, who sat beside her like a man who'd been sentenced to death and still couldn't believe that he'd been reprieved. "Maybe *you* can tell us?"

Mort's tongue crept out over the dryness of his thin lips. It took him a while to find his voice. "No . . ." he whispered weakly. "I . . . How would I know?"

Andamo glanced at Lucky. "Moran, maybe?"

Lucky shrugged. "Could be."

But neither of them really believed it. Not slackening speed, Lucky glanced in the rear-view mirror from time to time. The Cadillac didn't reappear behind them, but Andamo didn't put away his .32 until they reached the customs officers at the border.

It was nearly midnight when they reached the city. As they went through the suburbs, Mort said, "You can let us off anywhere along here. We can grab a cab the rest of the way."

Lucky pulled over to a corner and stopped the car. Reaching into his pockets, he got out the .45 and its clip, smacked the clip back into the gun and gave it to Mort. The skinny little man took it and slipped it back in his shoulder holster without a word. He climbed out of the car with Fan.

"Well," he murmured, "thanks again for the lift."

Fan smiled at them, turned and followed Mort. Lucky and Andamo watched them walk to the cab stand, Fan carrying her overnight bag, Mort toting the beach bag and suitcase.

"I wonder," Andamo mused quietly, "what those two are up to."

Lucky put the car in gear and headed west to the pier where their launch would be waiting to take them out to the *Fortuna.*

"Whatever they're mixed up in," he said, "it's got nothing to do with us."

He couldn't have been more wrong. . . .

Mort and Fan took a cab downtown, registered at a cheap, back-street hotel. In their room, Mort dropped the suitcase and beach bag on one of the beds, heaved a sigh of relief.

"Well," he growled, "we made it. I didn't think we were going to, for a minute there. I wonder how those bastards knew where I was?"

Fan looked at him blankly. "You think it was you they were after?"

"Who else? Every tough guy that's figured out it was me who pulled the Wertham job must be hunting me for the stones."

"I'm not so sure," Fan said. "I've got a hunch it was those two fellows who drove us up here that they were after. You figured those two wrong. Tourists don't carry guns. And did you notice the way the big one handled the car when we got ambushed? They were expecting trouble—or ready for it, anyway."

Mort thought about it, nodded slowly. "It's possible. Maybe the little guy with the gun's the other one's bodyguard."

Fan looked doubtful. "That big man didn't look to me like he *needs* a bodyguard."

Mort stripped off his jacket, tossed it on the bed. "All I know is, we made it safe. And that's all I care about. . . . I'm gonna take me a bath, wash all that road dust off me."

"I'm hungry," Fan said. "Suppose I go out and get us some sandwiches and beer?"

"Milk for me," Mort told her. "My ulcer's kicking up again. Too damn much excitement."

Fan left him and took the creaking self-service elevator down to the dingy little lobby. Outside, she hurried two blocks to an all-night diner. Inside one of the phone booths she dialed a number.

A man's heavy, rasping voice answered, "Yeah?"

"Bruno," she said into the phone, "this is Fan. . . . How the hell did I know they were heeled? They were supposed to be tourists. . . . No, I'm sure Mort doesn't know them. It just happened that way. And how come the shooting? You promised me. . . . Okay, okay. Just remember, nobody's supposed to get hurt. Nobody has to, if you handle it right." She told the man the name of the hotel they'd registered at, and their room number, then hung up.

When she returned to the hotel room, she was carrying a bag of sandwiches, a can of cold beer and a pint carton of milk. Mort was still making splashing sounds in the tub. Closing the door quietly behind her, not locking it, Fan went softly to his bed, opened his beach bag.

There was nothing in it but his wet swimming trunks and a damp towel. Puzzled, Fan glanced around the room, wondering where Mort had stashed the stuff while she was out.

She was in the room's only chair, nibbling at her ham sandwich when Mort came out of the bathroom in his slacks, buttoning his shirt. He was startled to see her.

"I didn't hear you come in," he said suspiciously. "How come?"

Fan shrugged. "You were splashing around too much in there, I guess." She gestured at the bag. "I got you Swiss cheese, like you like. Better feed that ulcer of yours."

Mort was reaching for the bag when the door opened behind him. He heard the sound, whirled—then froze when he saw the three men come into the room, and the long-barreled revolver one of them had trained on his stomach.

Fan put aside her sandwich and sat where she was, taut-nerved. She knew the intruders quite well: Bruno and two of his hoods. Bruno usually had three of them with him at all times, but one of them was going to be in storage for a month or so, his shoulder smashed by Andamo's bullet.

The stocky, cold-eyed man with the gun was Barney, a torpedo with a strange lust for killing. The other hood was Trenker, Bruno's muscleman; a tall, heavy-shouldered former pro fullback whose face looked as if it had been kicked apart and then put back together by a careless plastic surgeon.

Vicious characters, both of them; but next to Bruno himself they looked puny, almost harmless. He was a huge, meaty man built like a wrestler, with a face like a slab of beef in need of a shave and eyes utterly devoid of human expression.

While Mort was still gaping at them, stunned, Bruno closed the room door and locked it. Barney leaned against the wall and kept his gun leveled at Mort's middle, the fist holding it as steady as a rock. Trenker ambled over to one side of Mort and stood watching him, his arms hanging loose at his sides, his big hands slightly curled.

Bruno ignored the petrified Mort, looked at Fan. "Where're the stones?"

"I don't know," she told him. "All he showed me was one of them. A ruby. He must have the rest hidden somewhere in this room."

Bruno's empty eyes slid back to Mort. "Okay," he rasped. "Get 'em."

Mort was half turned, staring at Fan. He found his tongue at last. "A plant!" he whispered. "They planted you on me. And I fell for it!"

"You needn't look at me like that," Fan told him calmly. "You're no angel yourself. We're all in the same league—we all like money. Other people's money."

"Mort," Bruno snapped impatiently, "I told you to do something."

Mort glared at him. "Who *are* you? What . . ."

"What's it matter? You don't know us. You ain't gonna know us. We just take the stones and blow, and you don't ever see us again. So stop stalling. Get 'em."

Mort's scrawny face tightened as some of his initial shock left him. "You're out of luck," he blurted. "I don't have the stones."

"Don't play games with me, jerk," Bruno warned him softly. "I know you brought them back with you. You showed Fan one of 'em."

"That's the *only* one I brought back. The rest I left where I had 'em hid. You think I'd carry a bundle of stones around with me, so somebody like you could hijack 'em this easy? I just brought that one back so I can prove to anybody that wants to buy the rest that I got 'em." Mort straightened a bit, under control now. "Maybe *you* want to buy? 'Cause that's the only way you're gonna get the rest of them."

"I'm not buying," Bruno told him flatly. "I'm *taking* them. All of them. Get that through your skull."

Mort shrugged. "I told you. They ain't here. Except the ruby. You don't believe me, you can search the room. You won't find anything else."

Bruno turned his empty eyes on Fan.

She stood up, beginning to get scared. "I naturally assumed he had all of them," she explained quickly. "When he showed me the ruby I . . . Wouldn't *you* have thought . . ."

"Shut up," Bruno whispered tonelessly. "You loused up your end. Don't expect any cut." He went on staring at her a moment, then looked back at Mort. "Okay, I tried to do this the neat way. But you had to play it cute on me. So we do it the hard way. You're gonna take us to wherever you've got the rest of those stones. Any more tricks, and you'll wish you'd never been born. I promise you that."

Mort shook his head. "The *hell* I will," he said shakily. "I sweated out too many years waiting for those stones. You think I'm gonna just *give* 'em away now?"

Bruno nodded. "You *will.*" He jerked his head at the stocky, cold-eyed man with the gun. "Barney here's just aching for me to give him the word. You got any idea how hard a guy dies when he's got a slug in his guts?"

"You can't kill me," Mort blurted. "Nobody knows where that gem haul is but me. If I'm dead, it'll *never* be found. Not by you or anybody else."

"You're smart. Real smart." Bruno gestured at the big, scrambled-faced man. "So we don't kill you. I just turn Trenker loose on you. He starts by breaking the bones in your hands. Then your arms. That's just for a starter. You think you won't talk?"

Fan quickly stepped between Bruno and Mort, facing Bruno. "Now just a minute!" she snapped. "You promised me there'd be no rough stuff. You said . . ."

Bruno slapped her as effortlessly as though he were just brushing away an annoying fly. His huge palm smacked the side of her face with a sound like a pistol shot, knocking her off her feet and sprawling her across one of the twin beds. She huddled there, holding her enflamed cheek and looking dazed.

"I *told* you to shut up," Bruno said softly. He turned his empty eyes on Mort again. "Okay. Time's up. Do you tell me where the stones are, or do I tell Trenker to start taking you apart?"

Mort hesitated, thinking fast in spite of being more frightened than he'd ever been in his life. He knew he couldn't stand pain. But he also knew he couldn't just give away that fortune in gems. He had to take a chance—a chance based on his certainty that Barney wouldn't shoot. They couldn't afford to kill him until they had the loot.

Nerving himself, Mort let his narrow shoulders droop in pretended defeat. "All right," he muttered. 'There's no way out of it I guess. I put . . ."

He stopped talking in mid-sentence, threw himself at the bed on which he'd left his things. As he fell across it, his hand darted under his jacket and grabbed the .45 in the shoulder holster under it.

Trenker jumped him as he twisted around with the .45 in his hand, thumbing off the safety catch. The weight of the ex-fullback crushed Mort down on the bed and one of Trenker's hands closed around the barrel of the .45 to wrench it out of Mort's grasp.

Desperately Mort hung onto the gun, using both hands now, trying to turn the gun against Trenker's strength, to point the muzzle at Trenker and pull the trigger. In that same split second, Trenker's big hand closed around Mort's fist and twisted.

The .45 went off, its explosion muffled between their bodies.

Mort jerked, then went limp under Trenker's weight. Dumfounded, Trenker hauled himself off the skinny little man and stood up with the automatic in his hand. Mort lay motionless across the bed, his sightless eyes staring up at the ceiling, a red stain spreading around the burned hole in the front of his shirt.

Bruno stared down at him, suddenly spun and backhanded Trenker across the side of his head, knocking him against the wall. "You stupid fool! Now we'll *never* find out where he stashed those stones!" He turned on Fan, who sat on the other bed staring at Mort with stunned horror. "Where's that ruby? Might's well take that, anyway."

"It . . . In his . . . jacket pocket . . ."

Bruno quickly felt in the pocket, snatched out the ruby. "Let's get out of here, fast. We'll use the back fire-escape stairs."

Barney opened the door, glanced out to make sure the corridor was empty, put away his gun and hurried out. Trenker got out a handkerchief, wiped his fingerprints off the .45 and dropped it on the bed beside

Mort's body. As he rushed out, Bruno seized Fan's arm, dragged her to her feet and pushed her ahead of him on stumbling feet, out of the room. He shut the door behind him after wiping off both knobs.

Alone in the room, Mort lay sprawled across the bed, his secret locked behind his dead, staring eyes.

3

Lucky and Andamo were alone aboard the *Fortuna,* sharing a bottle of cognac and playing a fiercely competitive game of two-handed stud in the big, plush salon. Once, not long ago, the entire salon had been devoted to gambling. That was in the days when he had been known as "Mr. Lucky" to the well-heeled customers who streamed out past the three-mile limit in water-taxis to lose their cash at the roulette wheels and blackjack tables. But now the salon had been converted for dining and dancing, and there was only Lucky and Andamo to carry on their past profession in privacy.

Ordinarily the *Fortuna* would have been crowded, even at this dark hour of the morning. But this was Sunday night, the one time in the week when the *Fortuna* was not open for business. Its huge neon sign spelling out LUCKY'S and flashing his trademark, a modernistic figure of a cat, was dark. Alone at a table near the bar, Lucky and Andamo pitted their considerable skill against each other.

It would have been hard to find two more knowing, cagey poker players anywhere. And in the heat of their rivalry, they pulled every trick they knew. The only thing neither did was cheat—mainly because each knew the other was too alert to let him get away with it. When it came to bluffing or milking a pat hand for every cent it was worth, they were a match for each other, and over a long period of time, each had his winning streaks. At the moment, however, Lucky was getting the cards—and expertly gouging Andamo with them.

As Andamo shoved his stack of chips into the pot, convinced that Lucky was bluffing with two of a kind, Lucky smiled faintly. He showed what he had. "Full house, pal." He raked in the pot. "That makes it three weeks' worth of your percentage you owe me."

Andamo threw down his cards disgustedly. "A full week you been taking me. What've you done, Lucky —found a new way to mark the cards?"

Lucky laughed and sipped at his cognac. "That's not very sportsmanlike of you, Andamo. The trouble with you is you've never learned to lose like a gentleman."

Andamo grinned, in spite of himself. "I'm *not* a gentleman. Neither are you. I think this whole business of turning respectable is very bad for you. Next thing, you'll be trying to get in the social register. It . . ."

He stopped suddenly, listening. "Boat coming."

Lucky raised his head and heard the sound, frowned. "Now what would that be, at this time of night?"

"Trouble. What else?" Andamo got up and followed Lucky out of the salon.

Out on deck they saw that it was a police launch approaching from the shore, its searchlight trained on the dark hull of the anchored *Fortuna.*

"Cops," Andamo muttered, and hurried into his cabin to get rid of the .32. He had a permit for it, but with any possibility of cop-trouble, it was better not to make a point of it.

Lucky went to the head of the gangway ladder and watched the launch speed toward his vessel, leaving a white tail of foam on the black surface of the sea behind it. He lit a cigarette and smoked it, his eyes narrowing as the launch pulled alongside.

One of the men in the cockpit was his friend, Lieutenant Rovac, whose liking for Lucky had gotten him into hot water on the force a number of times, but who'd never wavered in his practical-minded acceptance of Lucky for what he was. Rovac was small for police detectives, but solidly built.

The other man, a lean homicide sergeant, Lucky knew only slightly.

While the police helmsman held the launch steady against the hull, Lieutenant Rovac climbed up the gangway, followed by the sergeant. Andamo came out to the rail beside Lucky and looked at the cops deadpan. Rovac was grim-faced as he came up on the deck. His eyes met Lucky's, but he did not hold out his hand.

The lean homicide sergeant grinned unpleasantly at Lucky. "Nice of you to wait here for us to come get you. But I guess you figured you were in the clear." He reached toward Lucky. "Raise your arms so I can frisk you."

Lucky pushed the sergeant's hand away from him. "You have a warrant?" he demanded.

"Take it easy, Lucky," Lieutenant Rovac warned him softly. "We've got a warrant for you two. For your arrest."

"And just what are we charged with?"

"About Andamo, Headquarters isn't sure. So he's being taken in on suspicion. But for you, Lucky"—Lieutenant Rovac hesitated, finding it hard to say the words—"the charge is murder."

Andamo looked at Rovac, asked mildly, "What kind of pills you been taking lately, Lieutenant?"

"It's not funny," Rovac grated. "I'm sorry. You know I don't like this. But my orders are to bring you both in. I've got no choice."

Lucky let the sergeant pat him for concealed weapons. As the sergeant did the same with Andamo, Lucky looked stonily at Lieutenant Rovac.

Rovac shrugged unhappily. "I tried to tell 'em at Headquarters, Lucky. I told them killing wasn't in your line. But the evidence is all against you. They've got you sewed up."

"Who am I supposed to have bumped?"

"A jewel thief named Morton Connors."

"Skinny little guy? Scrawny face?"

"You admit knowing him?" Rovac's eyes warned Lucky to be careful what he said.

The homicide sergeant laughed softly. "Sure he knew him. Put a .45 caliber slug into him, didn't he?"

"Shut up," Rovac snapped at the sergeant. "There's nothing funny about this."

Lucky asked quietly, "Exactly what have you got that says *I* killed Mort Connors?"

"The gun that killed him was found beside him. An unregistered .45, impossible to trace. There were no fingerprints on the outside of it. Headquarters figures you wiped the gun after you shot him, because you know we've got your prints on file. Headquarters also figures you were dumb enough to forget that your prints were on the cartridge clip inside the butt, put there while you were loading the gun. They found the prints on the clip, ran a check on 'em through the machine in the Fingerprint Bureau and they matched yours. I know that doesn't have to mean you killed him, Lucky, but Headquarters won't see it my way."

Lucky remembered taking the .45 clip out and putting it back in, and silently cursed the impulse that had caused him to stop and lend Mort Connors a hand.

"When was Connors killed?" he asked Rovac, searching for a way out.

"Two hours ago. In a downtown hotel."

"I've been here with Andamo for the last four hours."

Lieutenant Rovac got an eager, hopeful look on his face. "Got witnesses to prove that?"

"He told you," Andamo said. "Me. I'm his witness."

Rovac stopped looking hopeful.

The homicide sergeant grinned unpleasantly at

Andamo. "You? A grifter with a record? Better shut your mouth and keep it shut. You'll be lucky if you don't draw five to ten for being an accessory."

"I told you to be quiet!" Rovac snarled at the sergeant, letting off some of his misery. "Next time I have to tell you . . ."

Lucky interrupted, "I didn't even know Morton Connors's last name until you told me just now. So what reason would I have to kill him?"

Rovac told him, his face sad and frustrated, "Connors is rumored to have pulled a big jewel heist before he went to prison on another job he got tagged for. If that's true, those stones would still be around somewhere. Mort Connors got out a week ago. The way Headquarters sees it, you could have been trying to pry those gems out of him. He got sore, and you had to plug him."

"You know that's nonsense," Lucky said tightly.

Rovac nodded. "*I* know it. But it looks like they've got you for it anyway. You know I'll do what I can for you, but . . . Be careful what you say from now on. You've already admitted knowing Connors, which . . ."

"I don't know him. Andamo and I just picked him up south of the border. He wanted a lift north to Los Angeles so we took him along—him and his girl friend, Fan."

Rovac said quickly, "Redhead? Pretty?"

Lucky nodded. "A knockout."

Rovac frowned thoughtfully. "Sounds like the woman who registered at the hotel with Connors, as his wife. . . . Couple in the room next to Connors heard the shot, phoned the management. By the time the house dick came up to investigate, there was only Connors in the room, dead. The redhead wasn't there, hasn't been seen since. The Department's been hunting for her, but so far no luck. You know her last name? That might help?"

"No. Just her first name. Fan."

Rovac looked unhappy again. "She might have been a witness to the killing. Headquarters figures she'd be a witness *against* you, if we can find her. But if you didn't kill Connors, she might be the only one who could save you. . . . I don't suppose you'd know where she might be?"

"Nope. I told you I'd never met her before."

Lucky knew they had him cold. Rovac's friendship wouldn't weigh against those prints on the clip in the murder weapon. The District Attorney had all the evidence he would need, and the possible motive, to make the charge stick in court. A jury wouldn't be hard to persuade that a former professional gambler, who'd skirted the edge of the law in the past, would kill a man if there was enough money involved.

Rovac was right. Lucky was stuck with a murder rap and no way out—unless he could manage to get free long enough to find that red-haired girl named Fan; and maybe through her get the real story of the murder.

Lucky glanced at Andamo. His expression conveyed nothing to the other two men, but Andamo got it.

Rovac said reluctantly, "We'd better go, Lucky. You know I'll do what I can to help you. But right now I've got no choice but to take you in." He reached for Lucky's arm.

"Sure," Lucky said calmly. "Don't feel so bad about it. It's not your fault." He waited until Lieutenant Rovac's hand was on his arm.

The next second he exploded into motion, twisting his arm out of Rovac's grip, seizing his wrists, and throwing him at the homicide sergeant so they both fell against the rail in a tangle. Lucky spun and sprinted into the passageway between the salon and his cabin-office. The homicide sergeant managed to get his gun out while Lucky was still in sight in the passageway, but Andamo hurled himself at the sergeant, deflecting the gun in the instant he squeezed the trigger. The gun roared, its slug chewing into the deck. Rovac, disengaging himself from the sergeant, started to run after Lucky, but Andamo, still hanging onto the sergeant's gun hand, shot out his leg behind him, and Rovac tripped over it and hit the deck with his stomach, all the wind knocked out of his lungs.

Lucky reached the other end of the passageway, ducked out of sight there, crossed the starboard deck diagonally in three fast strides and was whipping off his jacket as he got a foot up on the rail. The next second he was over the rail in a straight dive, lancing into the dark ocean below and vanishing under its surface.

On the port side of the *Fortuna,* Rovac finally dislodged Andamo with a left uppercut to the jaw that dropped Lucky's partner as though his legs had been cut out from under him. Rovac charged through the passageway to the other side of the vessel, the sergeant scrambling to his feet and running after him.

But Lucky was gone when they got there, and there was no sign of him in the water.

Rovac hurried back to the portside, shouted down at the helmsman in the launch, "Radio the harbor police! Lucky's escaped. Tell 'em to spread out and catch him if he tries to get in to shore."

He turned to the sergeant. "Get down in the launch and have him circle around. See if you can spot Lucky."

As the sergeant hurried down the gangway, Rovac turned to Andamo. The wiry Latin was sitting up with a groan, holding his swollen jaw with his hand as his eyes blinked open. Rovac got out his handcuffs, crouched and cuffed Andamo's wrist to the rail.

Andamo went on soothing his jaw with his free hand. "That's some punch you got there, Lieutenant."

"I wish you hadn't made me slug you, Andamo. Just as I wish I didn't have to take you in."

"I'm not looking forward to it either," Andamo admitted. "Especially the food. No offense, but your city does not feed its prisoners the tastiest meals. I speak from experience." He let go of his tender jaw and looked at the cut on his hand where the sergeant's gunsight had raked his palm. "Ah well, I guess a few days of it won't ruin my stomach."

"A few days? You know how many *years* you've let yourself in for, aiding the escape of a man wanted for murder?"

"Lucky'll get me out," Andamo said calmly. "They won't be able to hold me on it after he proves he's innocent."

Rovac sighed. "I can understand Lucky trying to make a break for it. It's a bum rap they've pinned on him. But he hasn't helped the way it looks by trying to escape from the law; that just makes him look worse. And they'll catch him—if not in the water, then after he gets ashore."

Andamo grinned up at him crookedly. "You a betting man, Lieutenant? You can have odds. Four to one says they *don't* catch him."

4

Lucky surfaced for air off the dark starboard side of the *Fortuna.* Gasping his lungs full, he ducked his head under again, bringing his knees up to his chest so he could pull off his shoes. He straightened, facing his boat, watching it and treading water while he knotted the laces together and hung the shoes around his neck.

The police launch came around the stern of the *Fortuna,* its searchlight whipping back and forth across the dark sea. As the powerful beam lashed toward Lucky, he sucked in air and submerged, swam away deep below the surface and stayed under as long as his lungs could stand it. When he broke the surface again, the police launch was off to his right, heading in the opposite direction and swinging around the *Fortuna*'s bow. Lucky swam with a slow, powerful crawl parallel to the coast, away from the city harbor, aiming in the direction of Aronda Beach. . . .

An hour and a half of battling the strong pull of the Pacific current brought him to his destination, far from the *Fortuna* and the area where they would first concentrate the search for him. When he stood up in the pounding surf his legs threatened to give way under him. He staggered ashore, dripping water and shivering with cold as the chill night breeze hit him. Despite his exhaustion he didn't dare lie down on the beach. It would be bad enough if anybody spotted him soaking wet like this; if he was covered with sand, too, he'd attract even more notice.

He pulled on his shoes, trudged across the beach between some dark cabanas to the street. There was nobody else in sight, and there wasn't likely to be much traffic or many pedestrians at that time of morning—which was a break, except that he'd be that much more conspicuous if someone did drive by.

He plodded along the dark, deserted sidewalk. After a few blocks he spotted what he was after up ahead: an outdoor phone booth. He forced his tired legs to hurry—but he didn't quite make it.

A cab suddenly turned a corner behind him and came cruising in Lucky's direction, its headlights catching him on the sidewalk before he could dodge out of sight. There was no doubt that the driver could see that his clothes were soaking wet. The cops were bound to be broadcasting an alarm for Lucky, along with his description and the fact that he'd be coming out of the water somewhere along the coast near the city. If the cab driver hadn't heard such a broadcast yet, he probably would soon, and Lucky didn't want the cops knowing that he was in this area.

What couldn't be helped, had to be handled. Lucky stopped and turned to face the oncoming cab, waving his hand for it to stop. The cab swung over to the curb beside him, the driver leaning out and gawking at him.

Lucky grinned. "Boy, am I glad to see *you.*"

The driver looked him up and down, puzzled. "You been taking a swim or something, mister?"

"Yeah. Guess I was kind of potted. Forgot to take off my clothes first. People I came down to the beach with drove off without me. Some friends I've got. I'm lucky you came along."

The driver continued to look at him unsurely. "Where you wanna go?"

"The city." Lucky hesitated as though trying to make up his mind. "Union Station."

It was a long trip, which meant a big fare—and maybe a big tip. The driver studied him thoughtfully. "You got the money?"

"Sure. Maybe a little wet though."

"Wet or dry, money's money. Mind showing me some?"

"What're you acting so suspicious about?" Lucky snapped. "All I want is a ride to the train station, and right away you start asking me questions. Do you do that with everybody that hails your cab?"

"I don't run into many," the driver told him pointedly, "that's just been for a dip in the ocean with all their clothes on. It naturally makes me kinda wonder."

"Well, I've got plenty of money," Lucky assured him, and dug into his pocket to prove it. His fingers pushed aside the wet wad of bills in his pocket, closed around some change. He got a shocked look on his face as he pulled out the coins, looked at them in amazement.

"Hey," he muttered. "The rest of my dough must have slipped out of my pocket in the water. This is all I've got."

The cab driver sneered at him. "What I figured. It ain't enough for any ride to the station from here, bud. You're outa luck."

"I've got a friend who lives near the station," Lucky told him quickly. "We can stop at his place on the way. He'll lend me the fare."

"This time of night? I've heard that one before." The driver started to put his cab into gear to pull away.

"Wait a minute!" Lucky blurted. "I've got enough here for a bus, anyway. Where around here can I catch a bus to the station?"

The driver told him and added, "It's a long walk, bud."

"Guess I'll have to walk it though... unless you..."

The driver shook his head. "Not me. I don't push this hack for charity."

As the cab pulled away, Lucky started walking in the direction of the bus route, but as soon as the cab vanished from sight, he turned around and headed back toward the phone booth.

He had no intention of going to the train station—it was probably already staked out with cops looking for him. But he'd accomplished his purpose. Whenever that cab driver heard about the police looking for a murderer who'd escaped from them into the sea, he'd remember the water-soaked man who'd tried to pick up his cab near the beach.

He'd tell the cops how anxious Lucky had been to get to the train station, and they'd assume what Lucky wanted them to: that he was going to try to get out of the city, put as much space between it and himself as he could. It was a natural assumption, since Lucky was wanted for murder, and it would keep them from concentrating their entire search for him inside the city—which was where he was going to be.

Right now the problem was to get off the streets before dawn, and dawn wasn't far away. Lucky slid into the phone booth, dropped in one of his coins and dialed a number.

The phone at the other end was picked up on the sixth ring. A sleepy man's voice croaked, "Yeah?"

"Max, this is Lucky."

"Lucky? For crissake, Lucky, you know what time it is? What're you . . ."

"I'm hot, Max. I need to hole up in your place a couple days."

Max's voice lost some of its sleep-thickness. "I thought you were legit now?"

"Somebody dropped a package of trouble in my lap. It'll clear itself up," he lied. "But I've got to stay out of sight till it does."

"You got enough dough? Cost of living keeps going up, you know."

"I've got it," Lucky said. "And if I didn't I'd be good for it. You know that." He told Max where to come for him, and hung up.

There was a patch of tall, dry, dusty bushes between the sidewalk and the shore. Lucky pushed in among the bushes and when he sat down on the ground they hid him completely, yet allowed him to peer out at the dark deserted street. He sat there in his wet clothes, trembling with chill and not thinking of anything but the warmth and safety that would soon be his.

Half an hour dragged by before a battered Plymouth station wagon came cruising up the street and pulled to a stop beside the phone booth. A large fat man in dungarees and a sweater got out and looked around. Light from the street lamp shone on his moon of a face with the permanently puckered expression in its left side from an old knife wound in the cheek.

Lucky stood up among the bushes, shoved through them to the pavement. Max looked him up and down, taking in the soaked clothing but not remarking on it. He went back around the station wagon and shoved his bulk behind the wheel as Lucky got in. Lucky rolled his window up and turned on the heater, leaned back to savor its enveloping warmth as Max executed a tight U-turn and headed south.

"It's fifty per day, nowadays," Max informed him as he drove.

Lucky fished in his pocket, stripped five wet tens from his wad and handed them over.

Max took the bills and slipped them in his pants pocket, driving one-handed. "Meals are extra, of course. You'll like 'em. Got a new Mex cook at the stand. Makes the best hotdogs you ever tasted. Chili beans on 'em and everything."

Neither of them said another word the rest of the way.

Half an hour's drive brought them to a small cove ringed by a tile-roofed community primarily devoted to sports fishing. Max turned right into the town's single paved street. It was two blocks long—deserted and flanked by dark stores that in the daytime sold bait, tackle, food and other supplies to the fishing parties. At the end of the street Max's pier jutted out into the water.

There was a large clapboard building with a high sloped roof at the pier entrance that served both as a hotdog stand and Max's home. Moored at the pier was a variety of boats from dinghies to a forty-foot cabin cruiser which Max rented out to sports fishermen.

At times Max liked to go off in the cruiser for a spot of private fishing on his own. On such occasions he invariably returned after dark—with a cargo of wetbacks from Mexico. This was actually Max's most profitable business, and it was the reason why Lucky had turned to Max now. The clapboard building was constructed to conceal the wetbacks till they could be distributed around the state, and Max, having nothing against a profitable sideline, was occasionally willing to hide for a short time someone wanted by the law.

Max parked the station wagon behind the clapboard building. "We're just in time," he said quietly as they got out of the station wagon. "In another hour the place'll be swarming with eager beavers who want to get out on the water by dawn."

Lucky followed him in the back door, through the kitchen behind the hotdog stand to a flight of wooden steps. They climbed to Max's unpretentious apartment on the second floor.

"I need a hot shower before I hole up," Lucky told him. "I can do without catching some bug right now."

"Well, make it fast. I want you up in the attic before we open for business downstairs."

Lucky stripped off his wet clothes in Max's bedroom, got under a shower that he turned up as hot as he could stand. The pounding of the hot water on his flesh started his blood circulating normally again. Drying himself vigorously, he put on Max's terrycloth robe, wrapped his shoes and wet clothes in a bundle and carried them out to Max's living room.

Max was pouring him a cup of steaming coffee. "Here, this'll help, too. I don't want you getting sick on me." He poured a liberal shot of brandy into the coffee.

Lucky gulped it down, felt its fire spreading pleasantly through his insides.

"Okay," Max said. "Now let's get you out of sight."

There was no apparent entrance to any attic on the second floor. Max led him back into the bedroom, opened the closet there. Pushing aside the clothes-laden hangers, Max twisted one of the coat hooks in the closet's side wall. There was the sound of a lock clicking open. Max pushed at the rear wall of the closet with his hand and it swung open, revealing a dark narrow space between the back of the closet and the outer wall of the building.

Reaching into the opening, Max flicked a switch. A single light bulb went on inside the opening, somewhere overhead. Lucky went through the closet into the space between it and the outer wall, saw a ladder leading up the wall.

"Pleasant dreams," Max said. "I'll bring you up something to eat later in the day." He closed the rear wall of the closet, leaving Lucky alone inside the space behind it. The lock clicked shut.

Lucky climbed the ladder, crawled out on the wooden floor of the low, hidden attic. There were no windows, so the light from the single bulb could not be seen from outside the building. Except for some mattresses on the floor and a toilet in one corner, the attic was bare of furnishings.

Lucky spread his wet clothes and shoes out on one of the mattresses to dry, stretched his long, rangy frame out on another. For a while he lay there with his hands under his head, gazing up at the weak yellow glow of the light bulb and trying to think. But he was too weary to concentrate and as the feeling of safety and warmth enveloped him, his eyes became heavy, began to close and he let himself drift off into a deep, dreamless sleep.

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5

The fresh, tangy smell of the ocean that had filled the attic when Lucky fell asleep had been completely obliterated by the fumes of frying hotdogs, onions and hamburgers by the time he awoke. He came awake all at once, sitting up on the mattress as his eyes snapped open. Then he saw Max's head appear above floor-level through the opening, and realized what had alerted him out of his sleep so abruptly: the creaking of the ladder-rungs under Max's weight.

He rubbed the last vestiges of sleep from his eyes as Max dragged his soft bulk up onto the floor beside him. Max looked upset. The scar in his puckered cheek was livid. He sat down on the floor and brandished the folded newspaper he clutched in his fat hand.

"You didn't tell me it's a murder rap you're hiding from!" he whispered angrily.

Lucky calmly took the newspaper from Max, opened it. There was a two-column photograph of him on the front page.

"You gotta get outa here," Max told him tensely. "In a hurry. You know I wouldn't've taken you if I'd known you were *that* hot."

"I know," Lucky told him with a faint smile. "That's why I didn't tell you."

"Well now I know! So you're gonna . . ."

"What time is it?"

"Noon. A few minutes after."

"Want me to walk out of here in broad daylight and get spotted? The cops would hook you for hiding me."

Max frowned, thinking over the indisputable logic of Lucky's point. Finally he sighed unhappily. "Okay. You'll have to stay put here till dark. Don't make any noise. Now you're here, it can't be helped. You really suckered me, Lucky."

"I didn't. The fifty bucks did. You were just too greedy to ask enough questions." Lucky raised his arms and stretched the stiffness out of his muscles. "Right now I need a meal."

After Max made his cumbersome way back down the ladder, Lucky picked up the paper and carefully read the news story that went with his picture.

The opening paragraph was a request from the police to anyone who saw Lucky Santell, the man in the picture, or had any information about his possible whereabouts, to contact the police immediately. Lucky was described as clever and possibly dangerous; every law-enforcement agency in California and neighboring states was searching for him.

He was wanted for the murder of Morton Connors, a jewel thief who'd only recently been released from prison after serving a three-year stretch. The police believed that Connors might have hidden the loot from some of his jobs before his arrest, and that Lucky had killed Connors in an attempt to get his hands on this loot.

Lucky was believed to be the water-soaked man who'd tried to get a ride in a cab before dawn that morning. The cab driver's description fitted. According to the driver, Lucky had wanted to be taken to the train station, but had lacked money for the fare. The police surmised from this that Lucky was trying to get out of the state—and might have succeeded by now.

There was an account of Lucky's escape from the arresting officers. Andamo was in jail for helping him to escape, and for possible complicity in the killing of Morton Connors. He refused to say anything when questioned—except that he knew Lucky to be innocent and was confident that Lucky would prove this and win his release.

Lucky crumpled up the paper and threw it away from him. Grimly he contemplated the fact that what happened to Andamo now depended entirely on him. It wasn't only his own skin that he had to save now. He had to get the frame off himself to help Andamo. Giving himself up wouldn't do it. Only if he was able to prove himself innocent of the murder would Andamo get off the hook.

He wasted no time in mourning the way everything was stacked against him. He knew practically nothing about Morton Connors, and to find out anything now he'd have to run the constant risk of being spotted and grabbed by the cops. But that was the situation, and it couldn't be altered. He'd long ago learned there was no percentage in complaining when the cards hit you wrong. All you could do was play the hand that was dealt you as skillfully as you could.

Clearly and coldly Lucky studied the facts. No matter which way he assembled them, the redhead named Fan was his only tangible lead. She'd registered at that hotel with Morton Connors, wasn't there when he was found dead by the house dick, and hadn't been seen since according to the newspaper account. Of one thing Lucky was fairly certain: if she hadn't actually witnessed the murder, she would still have some idea of *why* Morton Connors had been killed.

The problem was to find her. Lucky remembered one chance remark she'd made during their drive up from Agua Caliente. She'd said she once worked briefly in a night club on the Strip. . . .

Max came back up the ladder with four chili-spiced hotdogs on a plate and a cold can of beer.

"I need some new clothes," Lucky told him. "Ones that are different from what I was wearing when I shook the cops." He thought for a moment. "Make it dungarees and a blue work-shirt. Canvas sneaks. And a pair of those big fisherman's sunglasses."

Max shook his head. "I'm not taking any more chances for you. It's bad enough I'm stuck with . . ."

"It's not bad at all," Lucky told him quietly, a frosty look forming in his eyes. "Not for you. I'll be out of here when it gets dark. If the cops get me, I won't mention your having helped me—*unless* you give me trouble. Understand?"

Max understood. "That's blackmail!"

"Uh-huh."

Max gave in, shrugged helplessly. "Okay. You've got me on a spot. But if . . ."

"That's not all," Lucky told him remorselessly. "I want you to contact somebody who can pull a car heist for me tonight."

Max realized there was no use in fighting it, and he took on the look of a persecuted martyr.

"Tell your heist boy," Lucky instructed him, "to lift a decent heap out of some used car lot tonight, right after the place closes for the day. That way it won't be reported till tomorrow morning. Have him leave it some place near enough for you to drive me to it. And you needn't mention my name to him."

"I *won't,* believe me. I'm not crazy. Or maybe I am."

"You're all heart, Max," Lucky said and told Max the sizes for the clothes.

Max grimaced, took his money, and went back down the ladder.

The hotdogs with their chili sauce turned out to be delicious with the cold beer. Lucky took his time over the meal while he considered the problems involved in finding a girl about whom he knew only that her name was Fan, she was a natural redhead, and she'd at one time danced—not well—in some joint on the Strip. About the last, there was always the possibility that she'd been lying. . . .

Lucky was waiting impatiently in his new outfit when Max finally came up for him that night. He followed Max down the ladder to his apartment.

"Soon as I get *you* off my hands," Max muttered as they entered his living room, "I'm gonna get drunk. I never had such a lousy day."

"It's not quite over yet," Lucky told him. "I've got to use your phone."

"Oh, no!"

"Don't worry. I won't be using my own name. No one'll try to trace these calls back here."

"Have a heart."

"Go downstairs and make sure nobody comes up and interrupts me. Just this one last thing, Max, and you're rid of me."

"I got a feeling," Max grumbled, "like I ain't *ever* gonna see the last of you." But he went down the steps to stand guard as Lucky had told him to.

Alone in the apartment, Lucky got out the phone book, and put through calls to managers of the night spots along the Strip. When he got the first manager on the phone, Lucky told him, "I'm calling from Granger Studios. Sorry to bother you like this, but we need some information. It's a special favor for Mr. Hielman."

Mr. Hielman, head of Granger Studios, was one of the more potent names in Hollywood. There wasn't a night-club manager in the state who wouldn't jump at a chance to have Mr. Hielman owe him a favor.

When the manager had quickly indicated his eagerness to be of service to Mr. Hielman, Lucky went on, "We are trying to locate a girl who may have danced at your place at one time. We're not sure when, and we don't know her last name. All I can tell you is that she's a natural redhead, and her first name is Fan. I know that this may be difficult to . . . Yes, I'll hold on. . . ."

Flipping his silver dollar, making it come up heads each time, Lucky waited while the manager consulted his employee files. Five minutes later the man came back on the phone sounding sad. He'd had a lot of redheads working in the place over the past few years —some of them with real red hair—but none named Fan.

Lucky thanked him, hung up, and dialed the next club on his list. He used the same spiel successfully with the manager of that club and the next two on his list. Some dancers named Fan, and a goodly number of redheads; but no one single girl combining the two.

He hit what sounded like her at the fifth place he called: a beautiful red-haired dancer named Fan Ferguson. Something else fitted, too. The manager said she'd been only fair as a dancer, that he'd hired her only because of her looks. She'd started working at his place a little over five months ago. She'd stayed four months and then quit, giving no reason.

The manager told him where Fan Ferguson had been living at the time. Lucky checked the phone book, found no Fan Ferguson listed at that address or any other.

Max was waiting for him downstairs at the back door. "My God, Lucky," he whispered as Lucky came down the steps. "What were you doing, calling all your relatives coast-to-coast?"

The station wagon was parked in the darkness behind the clapboard building. They got in and drove away from the pier, turned north.

The stolen car was waiting for them in a poorly lighted side-street between Compton and Southgate. It was a three-year-old Chrysler sedan in good condition. There was no one in it. Max pulled up behind it and stopped. "There she is."

"I'll have to owe you for it," Lucky said. "I'll need the dough I've got left to maneuver with."

Max didn't like it, but his eagerness to get rid of Lucky stopped him from arguing the point. "Just do me one favor, will you, Lucky? From here on, forget my phone number. Forget you even know me, will you?"

"How can I? A friend in need is a friend indeed, to coin a phrase." Lucky got out of the station wagon. His friend-in-need was roaring away up the street before he reached the other car.

Lucky slid in behind the wheel. The shorted ignition started the motor without any trouble. The gas tank was full. Now, if his luck held, he had till morning before this car was discovered missing from its lot and the cops started looking for it. Lucky let out the brake and headed for the place Fan Ferguson had lived when she was working on the Strip.

It was a rundown, overbuilt neighborhood, old before its time and just this side of becoming an urban slum. Some of the houses on the block were still trying to keep up appearances, but the address where Fan Ferguson had lived wasn't one of them. The shingle sides were about five years overdue for a paint job, and the pillars holding up the front-porch roof had no paint left on them at all. Two old shabby men sat on the porch steps under a *Rooms To Rent* sign and stared vacantly at the dark street.

With the infinite slowness of utter boredom they transferred their blank stares to Lucky as he got out of the Chrysler and crossed the broken pavement toward them.

"Fan Ferguson live here?" he asked them.

They thought about it. After about thirty seconds one of them cleared his throat and said, "Who?"

Lucky repeated the name. He didn't like letting them stare at him this long. Most people never really looked at a stranger; they were too absorbed with their own thoughts. But the minds of men like these seized avidly on anything new, and if they'd seen a newspaper that day . . .

"Don't know the name," one of the old men declared finally.

"She may not live here now," Lucky said. "She did five months ago."

"I only been here a couple months. Ain't nobody here that's been boardin' that long. The meals ain't what they could be."

"Molly's the one you better see," the other old man said. "She runs the house."

Lucky climbed the steps between them, crossed the sagging planks of the porch. As he raised his hand to knock at the front door, one of the old men told him, "You don't hafta knock. Just go on in. Molly'll be in the kitchen. In back."

The dim corridor inside smelled of boiled cabbage and damp linoleum and led back between a living room and dining room that looked as if they'd been furnished by a junk shop. Several elderly women were playing cards in the dining room. The kitchen in the rear was big and untidy, with ancient grease stains on the walls and floor and a clutter of dirty dishes in the old-fashioned sink.

There was a woman in the kitchen, drinking beer from the bottle while she watched a western on the small TV set on the table. She was a big woman, her bulk filling the rocker in which she sat. Her unkempt hair was a startling mixture of blond and gray. Her fat face was jolly, unless you looked at the eyes—cunning, greedy, cold-natured eyes.

She turned them on Lucky. "Looking for a room, friend?" Her voice was unexpectedly pleasant.

"No. Information. About a girl who lived here. Fan Ferguson?"

The big woman took a long swig of beer from the bottle, wiped the back of her pudgy hand across her soft little mouth. And all the time the cunning little eyes bedded deep in the flesh of her face examined him. "How come you're wearing those big sunglasses at night, friend? Ain't any sun glare in here."

Lucky preferred her being suspicious to giving those eyes a chance to see his face without the glasses. "I've got eye trouble. Have to wear them all the time."

"No kidding? Ain't that a shame."

"Fan Ferguson?" Lucky prodded her. "Would you remember her?"

"I got a memory like an elephant. Never forget a paying tenant. Specially one like her. Real full of herself. Guess she had a right to be. Gorgeous face and figure, and all that honest-injun red hair. But this town knocks the conceit out of 'em mighty fast. She just hadn't been here long enough."

"Know where I can find her?"

Her shrewd little eyes tried to pierce through the tint of his big sunglasses. "Why you looking for her?"

"Suppose I say an uncle of hers died and left her a fortune, and I'm trying to trace her for the estate?" Lucky suggested lightly.

The woman laughed good-naturedly. But her eyes stayed cold. "I just naturally wouldn't believe you, friend. My name's Molly. What'd you say yours was?"

"I didn't say." Lucky got a ten-dollar bill from his pocket, held it up between them. He repeated, "I'm trying to trace her for her late uncle's estate."

"Now I believe you," Molly said, and reached for the bill.

Lucky drew it back out of reach of her grasping fingers. "Where can I find her?"

Molly sighed. She took another swig from the beer bottle, wiped the foam from her lips. "Wish I could tell you. I ain't seen her or heard anything about her since she left."

"Exactly when'd she leave?"

Molly reached into her memory and came up with the date.

Lucky frowned thoughtfully. "That was when she went to work at Seely's?"

"What's Seely's?"

"A club on the Strip. Didn't you know?"

Molly shook her head. "She told me she'd gotten a contract with one of the studios. Not that I believed her, of course. She was just boasting. Always did say as soon as she landed a decent job she'd kiss this place good-by. Not that I blamed her for feeling that way. She'd lived in worse dumps than this since hitting this town. But they're all alike, those pretty things that come here. They figure they're just marking time till some talent scout spots 'em and makes big stars out of 'em. Takes 'em a while to wise up."

"Where'd she move to when she left here?"

Molly eyed the ten-dollar bill. "I could lie. But you look like a right john to me, so I won't. She didn't say where she was going, and I didn't ask. She'd've just lied, like she did about having a movie contract. Probably've claimed she was moving into a suite at the Beverly Hills."

"You're not much help," Lucky told her flatly.

"No, I'm not, am I? Tell you what, though. I can give you the place where she lived before she came here. You trace her back, maybe you'll run into somebody that's heard something about her lately."

"If that's the best you can do . . . You don't know anybody who was a special friend of hers?"

"Nope." Molly gave him the address where Fan Ferguson had lived before coming to her boarding house. She eyed the ten-dollar bill as she spoke.

Lucky put the ten-spot away, brought out a five and gave it to her.

"Well," Molly murmured as she took it, "half is better'n nothing." She stuffed it into her bodice. "Like a beer?"

"Some other time." Lucky left her and went back out to the Chrysler.

As soon as he was gone, Molly heaved her bulk out of the rocker and waddled to the phone. She dialed a number, listened to the ringing at the other end. On the fourth ring, a man's voice answered.

"Rudy Marco? . . . Lucky I got you in," Molly said into the phone. "This is Molly Berman. Remember? You gave me some dough to tip you if I heard anything more about Fan Ferguson? . . . Yeah. Well, some guy was just here, hunting for her. . . . He didn't say, but he looked real anxious. . . . No, he ain't here now. But I know where he's going to be. . . . You hurry right over here with twenty bucks, and I'll tell you."

6

Lucky traced Fan Ferguson back through a succession of dreary hotels and drearier apartments. His nerves grew more taut with each place he hit. Sooner or later, if he kept it up, someone was bound to look at him and remember his picture in the newspaper. But there was no out. He had to chance it. Fan Ferguson remained his only key to the murder of Mort Connors.

From the places where she'd lived, Lucky picked up assorted bits of information about her. He learned that she was from Detroit, and that she'd come here over two years before after winning a beauty contest back home. She'd arrived all primed for a movie career. But she hadn't made it, or even gotten near it. She'd worked at a series of dull, low-pay jobs—as a waitress, store clerk, carhop, dime-a-dance girl, office receptionist. During her second year in town she'd begun missing meals so she could save enough from these jobs to pay for dancing lessons.

Like so many who jumped on this town's merry-go-round in hopes of catching the gold ring, she'd finally discovered that healthy, young good looks weren't quite enough. She'd tried to remedy this by acquiring a talent. But, according to Fan herself, she hadn't turned out to be much of a dancer.

This much Lucky learned, but he didn't find out where to locate her now. As it turned out, none of the people he spoke to knew even what he did—that she'd finally landed a job in a night club on the Strip.

In the dingy lobby of the last place, he went into the phone booth and put through another call to Seely's Club. When he got the manager, he reintroduced himself as the man from Granger Studios, calling for Mr. Hielman. The manager remembered, and was still eager to be of assistance to Mr. Hielman.

"I'm afraid we've run into a blank wall in trying to locate Fan Ferguson," Lucky told him. "That address you gave us. She left there when she came to work for you. And nobody seems to know where she went from there. You wouldn't happen to have another address for her, would you?"

The manager checked, could find no change of address listed for her. "One thing occurs to me, though. You might try the phone book. . . ."

"I tried. No Fan Ferguson."

"Damn, that's something I forgot to tell you. Fan changed her name shortly after she came to work here. She decided Ferguson wasn't a good stage name."

"What name'd she take?"

"Kent. Fan Kent."

Lucky considered it. "Might be a lead. But just in case, is there anyone working at your place now who was close to her? Someone who might have been in touch with her recently?"

"I'll ask around. Hang on."

Lucky waited, dropped more coins in the phone when the operator told him his time was up, and waited some more.

The manager came back on the phone. "There *was* someone working here who was quite friendly with Fan. Dolores Brown. Hat-check girl. I had to fire her shortly after Fan quit. Caught her dipping into the tip box."

He gave Lucky Dolores Brown's address. When Lucky thanked him, the manager said, "Don't mention it. Just give my best to Mr. Hielman and tell him I'm glad to be of help. If he should happen to drop into our club some evening, please tell him it would be an honor to consider him my personal guest."

"I'll do that," Lucky assured him, and hung up. He checked the phone book, found no listing for Fan Kent.

As Lucky emerged from the fleabag hotel, a man hidden in the shadows of the next doorway watched him cross the pavement to the Chrysler, and as Lucky opened the car door to get in, the street lamp shone full on his face.

The man in the doorway was Rudy Marco. He'd been tailing Lucky ever since the tip from Molly Berman had put him on his trail. But he hadn't figured out yet just what Lucky was up to or even who he was—just that he, too, was looking for the redhead.

And this was the first time he'd gotten a clear look at Lucky's face.

He tensed as he recognized that face. As soon as Lucky was inside the Chrysler, Rudy Marco hurried to his own car, quickly picked up the newspaper that lay on the front seat, and took a sharp look at Lucky's picture on the front page.

He'd been right. The guy he'd been following all this time was the one wanted for bumping Mort Connors.

He dropped the newspaper back on the seat beside him, let out the brake, and tailed Lucky's car. . . .

Dolores Brown's address was a narrow downtown hotel squeezed between a penny arcade and a saloon. All the places of amusement on the block had huge neon signs out front, which made the street too well-lighted for comfort.

Lucky drove through the street, turned the next corner, and kept going till he found a dimly lit side-street a few blocks away. Parking the car, he made his way back through a couple of alleys that bisected the intervening blocks.

The hotel lobby was no more than an extra-wide corridor, with an alcove for the desk clerk and switchboard operator. There was carpeting that reached from wall to wall, but showed the floor through several shoeworn spots in the middle. In the wall across from the clerk's alcove was a glass door leading into the saloon next door.

"What room is Dolores Brown?" Lucky asked the desk clerk.

"Nine-Oh-Three," the clerk informed him without hesitation. "But if you're looking for her, I just saw her go in there." He nodded at the door across the lobby.

Lucky pushed through the door and entered the saloon. It was a long, narrow place, with the bar up front and tables and booths in the rear where the connecting door to the hotel was. Its lighting might have been called discreet in some joints; in this one it only succeeded in being sinister.

The place wasn't crowded. There were some couples at the bar. In one of the booths three men were sizing up a lone girl drinking at a table. She was a short, curvy girl with straight brown hair and a tired expression. She concentrated on the drink in her hand, not looking at the men in the booth, but she was fully aware of them—not ignoring them, merely waiting.

Lucky went to her table. "Dolores Brown?"

She looked up at him without interest, but also without any antagonism. "Yeah. Who sent you?"

A waiter materialized out of the murk. Lucky sat down at her table and ordered himself a bourbon on the rocks. When the waiter left, he told Dolores Brown, "I'm trying to find Fan Ferguson. Know how it can be done?"

She began to look interested. "Who are you?"

"A guy who's trying to find Fan Ferguson."

"Why?" She didn't sound suspicious, only curious.

The waiter reappeared with Lucky's drink, and an unordered one for the girl. Lucky paid for both without protest. As he did, he noticed that a new man had come into the place and was sliding onto a stool at the bar.

"Why're you looking for Fan?" Dolores Brown went on as the waiter left them.

"She's been left a legacy," Lucky told her, with no attempt to be persuasive.

The girl grinned at him wolfishly. "You don't look like any lawyer to me."

Lucky put a ten-dollar bill on the table. It was the same one he'd used on Molly at the boarding house. He pinned it to the table between them with his stiff-held forefinger. "Any reason why you shouldn't help me find her?"

Dolores looked seriously at the bill, shook her head. "Matter of fact, no reason at all. What's she ever done for me? When I got fired from my last job and was stony broke, I called up her hotel to ask her for a loan of a few bucks to tide me over. She wasn't in, but I left a message, and she never even called me back. So what do I owe her?"

"Not a thing. What hotel?"

Dolores told him. "She's registered there under the name of Fan Kent. Or she was, anyway. Maybe she's moved out. She said she had big plans when she quit the club where we both worked."

Lucky kept his finger on the ten-spot. "What kind of plans?"

Dolores shrugged. "Search me. Some guy from her home town came into the club one night. Big mobster, from what Fan said. They remembered each other from the old neighborhood, and he took her out after the joint closed. Next night she's acting mysterious like. Tells me this mobster's made her a proposition. Not the kind you'd think, either. Something he wants her to do, and she'll wind up with a big wad of cash for it."

"Did she go for it?"

Dolores grinned at him. "Who wouldn't? Fan was damn tired of wearing out her arches every night in the chorus. She was all over that dream about somebody from one of the studios spotting her and giving her a screen test. We all got to get over it, sooner or later. So why shouldn't she jump at the chance for enough dough to climb out from under the rock? I would."

"You don't know what this job was she was supposed to do?"

"Uh-uh. Fan didn't say."

"Know the name of this mobster?"

"Yeah. She told me. Bruno Rangoni. I never heard of him. But Fan said he was real big, back in Detroit."

Lucky had heard of Bruno Rangoni. And he'd heard about him moving out here over a year ago, when the heat on him got too strong back in Detroit. There'd been rumors since about Bruno making new connections to operate out here in the west. Lucky didn't know exactly what Bruno Rangoni had so far managed to muscle his way into, but the chances were he was still only nibbling at the fringes. There were a few strong boys who had the west pretty well sewed up among them, as far as the organized rackets were concerned.

Lucky took his finger off the ten-dollar bill. Dolores Brown closed her fist around it as he rose from his chair.

He went to the phone booth in the rear of the saloon, put through a call to the hotel she had told him about. Another blank wall. Fan Kent had checked out three weeks ago, and had left no forwarding address.

But his talk with Dolores Brown wasn't entirely wasted. Lucky still had Bruno Rangoni—and he knew where the Detroit mobster was living. Bruno had gotten a lot of publicity, trying to muscle into café society by throwing big parties. Lucky strode out of the saloon, headed back toward where he'd left the car.

He went back the way he'd come—through the alleys, avoiding lighted streets as much as possible. The whole city was his enemy. Out in the open, no place was safe and anyone might be a plainclothesman. Anyone he passed might recognize him and call the cops. He had to maneuver as though the entire city had suddenly become hostile.

Lucky was just emerging from an alley when he spotted a police patrol car turning the corner to his right and coming up the street in his direction. It came slowly, cruising. They hadn't seen him, not yet. Keeping his movements casual so that he wouldn't attract attention, Lucky turned around before the prowl car's headlights reached him and went back into the alley.

There was a man down at the other end of it.

Lucky didn't see him clearly. He saw only the man's shadowed figure in the opposite end of the alley, and he saw that only for a split second, because the moment Lucky re-entered the alley, the man at the other end had dodged back out of sight.

A chill crawled along Lucky's back as he stared at where the man had been.

It *could* be some guy who'd just been following him in hopes of an opportunity to pull a mugging. It could be that, and no more. And the ones Lucky had to fear first were the cops in that prowl car coming up the street behind him. . . .

Lucky let out his breath slowly and continued into the darkness of the alley. But the knots inside him didn't loosen; and he didn't try to make them. If that man was waiting for him at the other end . . .

But when Lucky reached the other end of the alley and looked out, there was no one in sight who seemed to be paying any attention to him.

Lucky crossed the street, turned right for a couple of blocks, and then began circling the area, following a route that would eventually lead him back to his car without running into the prowl car again. He glanced behind him several times without pegging any tail, yet he couldn't shake the feeling that the man he'd seen dodge out of sight in the alley had been following him.

But why? If it was some man who'd recognized him from his picture in the paper, he'd have rushed to a phone and called the police. Or he might have decided he could be wrong and had better mind his own business. But whatever he decided to do about it, it was unlikely that any guy in his right senses would decide to try tailing an escaped murderer just for the thrill of it.

Still, the feeling of being followed persisted. And Lucky had long ago learned to trust the nervousness of his instincts. Deliberately, he strode three more blocks without once looking back. If there *was* someone behind him, Lucky intended to give him time to get lulled into carelessness.

Taut-nerved, he continued walking at the same pace—past an old woman peddling flowers, past three kids brawling in the gutter, past a candy store in front of which a teen-ager was showing off what he'd done to the motor of his hot-rod for the benefit of a couple of girls who didn't understand a word he was saying.

Lucky reached an alley, turned into it abruptly.

The alley was long and dim. He strode through it till he reached a vine-choked doorway recessed into a stone garden wall. Lucky got into the darkness of the doorway, pushing himself back against the vines. Then he bit his lower lip to still his breathing and waited, watching the dim alley.

In a few seconds he heard quiet footsteps entering the alley, coming through it the same way he had, hurrying.

The backs of Lucky's shoulders pushed against the vines. A sharp twig dug into his spine. The footsteps quickened, drawing nearer. Then a man went past Lucky's hiding place.

As soon as the man's back was past him, Lucky stepped out and grabbed—snaking one arm around the man's throat and yanking him backward. Jerked off balance, the man tripped over his own ankles and went down. Lucky landed on the man's stomach with both knees.

The wind came out of the man's lungs with a strangled gasp. Before he could recover, Lucky chopped his fist across the man's jaw, twisting his shoulders behind it. The man's body convulsed under him, almost throwing him off. Lucky slugged him again, in the temple, using his fist like a hammer. The man went limp under him, his head sagging sideways.

Lucky stood up and leaned against the alley wall. He was breathing hard, and drenched with perspiration. Glancing quickly at both ends of the alley, he saw they'd attracted no attention and were still the only ones in the alley. Lucky looked down at the man's still form and saw why he'd been able to take him so easily. He wasn't very big, and what was there didn't add up to any powerhouse.

Lucky saw also that he'd been right about being followed. He'd seen this guy before—in the saloon where he'd talked with Dolores Brown.

With another quick look toward the ends of the alley, Lucky crouched beside his unconscious victim. The guy's hat had fallen off when he'd been grabbed. In the gloom of the alley, his hair looked blond. He had a young, tough face. Lucky judged him to be in his late twenties. The clothes he wore were cheap and flashy, the shoulders of his jacket overpadded, his necktie long and thin.

Lucky jerked the tie off him, rolled him over on his stomach and used the tie to secure his wrists tightly behind him. Then he rolled the guy over on his back again and went through his pockets. There were coins, keys, almost two hundred dollars in small bills, and a .25 caliber automatic. But there was no wallet, nothing in the way of identity papers, not even a driver's license.

Lucky slipped the little automatic into his hip pocket after making sure the safety was engaged. Then he lifted the guy's limp head between his hands, began massaging his ears and temples to bring him around. He was getting more nervous with each second that he had to remain in that alley with him. If someone entered the alley and saw what was going on . . .

The young tough moaned suddenly and his head jerked in the grip of Lucky's hands. Lucky lowered the head gently to the ground and began pulling his ears. After a few seconds of that, the guy's eyes snapped open and Lucky let go of him and sat back on his heels, waiting.

The guy stared up at him blankly for a few seconds, then tried to sit up. When he found that his wrists were tied behind him, he lay back and went on gazing up at Lucky.

"What's the pitch?" he asked Lucky thickly. "Why'd you grab me? What do you want with me?"

"You're the one with the answers," Lucky told him quietly. "Why were you tailing me?"

"Me? I wasn't tailing anybody."

"I'm not guessing," Lucky warned him.

"I don't even know you. Why should I . . ."

"You know me." Lucky took the .25 from his hip pocket. He'd never liked guns much, and he had no intention of using this one. But being pegged as a murderer had a limited advantage, and he used it. Placing the muzzle of the little automatic against the young tough's forehead, he snicked off the safety with his thumb. "I don't have time to play twenty questions with you."

The guy lay there very still, blinking up at Lucky. Suddenly, surprisingly, he managed a crooked grin. "Okay," he admitted, "you've got me."

"Yes, I have. Who are you, anyway?"

"My name's Rudy Marco. And I've got a lousy headache. You ought to be more careful when you . . ."

"Why've you been tailing me?"

"I spotted you, from your picture in the paper."

"So?"

Despite his position, Rudy Marco shrugged. "So I followed you. In my line you learn to look for the angles, play something along till it gets ripe."

"Exactly what is your line?"

Rudy Marco grinned again. "Anything that pays cash. Just like you."

"What the hell's that supposed to mean?"

"You know."

"I don't." Lucky pressed the .25 into the skin of Rudy Marco's forehead. "Spell it out."

"All I mean is I know your reputation. And when I spotted you I got to thinking about how the cops're after you, and what they're after you for. So I just sort of figured I'd tag after you for a while, see what happened. Why not?"

"Why didn't you tip the cops?"

"Me?" Rudy Marco raised his eyebrow in a ridiculously elegant gesture. "I don't care much for the cops."

"You're stringing it out too long," Lucky snapped. "Why'd you follow me? I won't ask it politely again."

"You know where the loot is."

Lucky frowned down at him. "What loot?"

Rudy Marco sighed impatiently. "The Wertham gems, of course. Why play it dumb with me?"

"You've got the wrong man," Lucky told him.

"No, I haven't. I'd bet my right arm Mort Connors pulled that Wertham job. And if you bumped Connors . . ."

"I didn't."

"Who cares? You knew him. Let's say you didn't shoot him. But that still leaves you maybe knowing where those gems are. Look, why play it cozy with me? You're in a jam. I can help you. I know my way around. I got connections that'd help us unload the stuff, and help you blow the country, too."

"You'd better follow somebody else," Lucky told him flatly. "I can't lead you to any loot."

"Maybe you don't believe I can help you? You're wrong. Come on, Lucky. Let me in on it. Just a little cut of the take. With me along you wouldn't have to be out in the open where the cops can make you. I'll . . ."

But Lucky was through listening. He used Rudy Marco's handkerchief to gag him, tied his ankles together with his shoelaces. He'd be able to get himself loose in a half hour or so, but by then Lucky intended to be long gone.

Rudy Marco's eyes looked up at him with an unhappy expression. Lucky grinned. "Don't take it so hard, grifter. Some days none of us can turn a nickel." He stood up, went out of the alley leaving the bound and gagged man behind. Making his way back to where he'd left the Chrysler, Lucky got in and drove away to have a talk with Bruno Rangoni.

It was an elegant neighborhood, one where they judged your social standing strictly on your financial standing. Which was how a man like Bruno Rangoni got in. Lucky passed Bruno's place and drove on for five hundred yards before pulling off the road. He parked the Chrysler out of sight in a grove of trees and walked back, keeping to the shadows beside the road, ready to duck out of sight if a car came along. In a section like this the cops patrolled constantly, and anybody on foot was automatically viewed with suspicion.

There was a wrought-iron gate barring the entrance in the high rock wall that surrounded the grounds of the house on top of a little hill. The wall had to do a lot of surrounding. The grounds were spacious and from what he could see through the gate, the moonlit landscaping of trees and shrubs was laid out in a gracious, neat pattern that went well with the beauty of the Spanish-style house.

The house itself gleamed whitely in the moonlight, with golden spots of light at some of the windows. It was a huge house, curved in a semicircle around a pillared pergola.

For a while Lucky stood there in the protective shadows of the trees across the road, tensely considering the best way of handling this interview with Bruno Rangoni. He couldn't just walk in, introduce himself and start asking questions about Fan Ferguson. There was a strong possibility that Rangoni was as involved with what had happened to Mort Connors as Fan herself was. That could have been the job Rangoni had wanted her to do for him. Lucky thought about the way they'd been ambushed down below the border. That could have been Rangoni's boys. And Fan could have tipped Rangoni they were coming; the men at the ambush had certainly known when to expect them and the kind of car they'd be in.

On the other hand, if Rangoni knew nothing about Mort Connors, he'd probably grab Lucky and call the cops. Mobsters were as law-abiding as any citizens —when it came to *unorganized* crime.

The only way to play it was to get inside unannounced, see how many guys he had to contend with, and work out his moves from there. Gripping the tiny automatic in his fist, Lucky crossed the road and went to the wrought-iron gate. It was locked. There was no sound from the white stone house atop the hill inside, but light shone from most of the windows. As Lucky looked toward it, a figure passed one of those lighted windows.

Lucky's mouth was dry as he moved along the side of the high wall. He turned a corner with it, kept going till he came to a place where the wall was in darkness. Thick vines clung to the wall there. Shrouded in shadow, Lucky tested the vines. They felt thick and solid, anchored to the wall.

Taking a deep breath, he reached up high and grasped the thickest branches of the vine, began hauling himself up, finding footholds in the stones of the wall. Reaching the top, he paused for a moment, hunched low so that he would not be outlined against the star-filled sky.

The grounds immediately below him were dark and thickly wooded. Getting his feet under him on the inner edge of the wall top, he shoved himself off with his hands and dropped about six feet, landing with a grass-cushioned impact on the ground inside the wall.

For a moment he crouched there, listening. He heard nothing to alarm him. Straightening, he turned toward the house.

From the darkness to his left, a man's voice struck him, hard and thin-edged, "Stand right where you are. Drop what you got in your hand."

Lucky froze.

The voice stabbed at him again, "I said drop it. And grab your hands behind your head. Before I blow a hole through you."

7

Lucky let the .25 fall from his open hand. His face was without expression as he raised his arms and laced his fingers together behind his neck.

A stocky man in a black-linen suit and bow tie emerged from the shadows and stepped into a beam of moonlight in front of him. There was a long-barreled revolver in his hand. Lucky remembered him from the ambush attempt below the border. He gazed at the stocky man impassively and waited.

Barney patted Lucky to make sure he wasn't carrying another weapon. He did it carefully, keeping his revolver well back where Lucky couldn't snatch at it. Satisfied, he stepped back and eyed Lucky, his wide, thin mouth barely moving when he spoke.

"We been waiting for you, jerk."

Lucky knew then that he'd been guilty of playing his hand without sufficient care. He'd been too impatient to cover himself. "Dolores Brown?"

Barney nodded. "Broad like her can always use a favor from a big guy like Bruno. She phoned and said some guy'd been asking questions about Bruno and Fan." He motioned with the gun. "Walk to the house. Slow. In front of me."

Lucky went past Barney. All of him felt like a spring ready to let go—if the stocky gunman only gave him an opening. Barney didn't give him one. He was a pro, and he stayed well behind Lucky as he followed him. Lucky went along a winding lane between rows of high hedges, climbed the slope with his hands still laced behind his head. Barney's footsteps were quiet behind him, keeping pace. They turned into a graveled path that led to a pillared side entrance of the house.

"Go in," Barney ordered.

Lucky opened one of the French doors and entered a black-marble foyer. Barney came in after him, shut the door with his free hand without taking his eyes or gun off Lucky. He nodded at an open archway.

"Through there."

Lucky walked out onto a wide flagstone patio, in the center of which a little fountain spurted up delicate jets of water colored blue and yellow by hidden lights. There were two men on the patio. Both were big men, but one was a lot bigger than the other.

The smaller of the two was about six-feet-three, with hulking shoulders and a dull-eyed face that had taken a lot of knocking around. He stood with his fists shoved deep in his pockets, watching the other man, who squatted on the edge of a wide sofa, casting a pair of red dice on a low green-marble cocktail table.

The seated man was massive, and none of the mass looked soft. He had a brutish face that didn't belong over the formal dinner jacket he wore. The hand in which he shook the dice was huge, the back of it hairless, the fingers so thick they appeared swollen.

"Bruno," the stocky gunman said, "here he is. I caught him comin' over the wall."

Bruno, the huge man with the dice, turned his face around and stared blankly at Lucky for a moment, his eyes frightening in their lack of emotion. Then, surprisingly, he put down the dice and a wide grin broke across his brutal face. He stood up with a jerk, as though he'd worked a lever inside himself to raise his weighty bulk.

"By Christ!" he rumbled. "Good to see you, Lucky."

He said it as though he were receiving an unexpected visit from his dearest friend.

Lucky met his eyes stolidly. "You know who I am."

"Sure. I figured out it had to be you after Fan's old girl friend phoned us." He beamed at Lucky for a moment. "Why'd you climb over the wall? Whyn't you just ring the bell at the gate?"

"I wasn't expecting to be this welcome a guest."

Bruno laughed harshly. "I can't think of anybody I'd be gladder to see right now. You should've called me on the phone. We'd've come and got you. Don't wanna run any chances on you getting picked up by the fuzz, do we?"

"Your concern for my welfare touches me," Lucky said coolly. "I just hope your little friend here doesn't squeeze that trigger in some excess of affection."

Bruno laughed again. There was little mirth in it. He gestured a heavy hand at the stocky gunman. "Put the gun away, Barney. Just a misunderstanding. We're all friends here."

Barney shoved the revolver out of sight in the shoulder holster under the lapel of his jacket, folded his short arms across his chest and leaned against the side of the arched doorway, not taking his cold eyes off Lucky.

"You can relax, too, Trenker," Bruno told the tall, big-shouldered hood. "Stop looking like a watchdog."

Trenker relaxed his stance a little, tried his best not to look belligerent. But, like Barney, he kept his eyes on Lucky.

"I'll bet you need a drink," Bruno barked at Lucky. "That was pretty slick, shaking the cops like you done. I read all about it in the papers. How'd you manage it?"

"I just went for a swim."

Bruno grinned and whacked Lucky on the shoulder. It was a powerful, open-handed blow that almost knocked Lucky off his feet. "That's a good one! Just went for a swim . . . We're gonna get along, Lucky. You want that drink?"

Lucky nodded. He did want a drink. Badly. Bruno's heavy-handed friendliness unnerved him more than the mobster's brutal face which showed absolutely no friendliness at all.

Bruno turned toward the house and bellowed, "Hey, Ferguson! Bring out one of those trays of liquor!" He looked back at Lucky. The good humor he was exuding still hadn't established contact with his eyes. They looked at Lucky with all the warmth of two pieces of ice. "Sit down. Take the load off. You been on the dodge since you got away from the cops?"

"Uh-huh."

"So you must be beat. So sit down."

Lucky lowered himself to the edge of the wide sofa. Bruno stood over him, studying him with those eyes. Lucky didn't ask any questions. He knew he was going to get the answers soon enough, and he had a hunch he wasn't going to like them. The pair of red dice were on the green-marble table. Lucky picked them up and fiddled with them, the familiar feel of them giving him some small comfort. He had always been, he reminded himself stubbornly, a man with more than his share of luck.

The trouble was, it was always the longest lucky streaks that ended with the heaviest thuds.

Bruno said, "I guess you didn't have no place else to go. Right? So you came to me because you know I won't let the law have you?"

Lucky nodded absently and tossed the dice on the green-marble slab. They came up six, and he couldn't read any message in that. He hadn't sevened, but he hadn't crapped-out either. Just a number you tossed and then had to stick with and hope for the best. He wished there was a way he could copper his bet.

"You wanna make a deal," Bruno suggested. "That it?"

Lucky was considering his answer when Fan Ferguson strolled through the arch onto the patio, carrying a tray with a bottle and glasses on it. Her figure looked vibrant as ever in tight black toreador pants and an open-necked white blouse, and the face framed by her untidy mane of red hair was still lovely. But there was a peculiar sway to the way she walked, and something in her face announced that she was on her way to being drunk.

"What do you think I am, Bruno," she demanded a bit thickly, "your servant?"

"Quit complaining and set the stuff down." He jerked his thumb at Lucky. "Our visitor showed up."

"I see he did," she stated disinterestedly. She set the tray on the cocktail table and then looked at Lucky directly for the first time. "Hello. Welcome to the mob." She straightened and looked at Bruno. "Where'd you find him?"

"That's what's so nice. I didn't. He found me."

"Well, then," the redhead said, "everything's turning out just perfectly lovely, isn't it?"

She took up the bottle and a tumbler and poured the glass almost half full with the whisky. Bruno snatched the bottle out of her hand. "Whyn't you just drink from the bottle, you lush?"

"I'm not a lush," she told him firmly. "But I'm going to be. Maybe then I'll forget what a dope I was to believe you when you said nobody was going to get hurt."

Lucky sat up a little straighter.

Bruno shrugged. "Things happen you don't expect."

Fan nodded. "They sure do." She nodded at Lucky. "You gonna kill him, too?"

"Shut up," Bruno told her, very softly.

She shut up. She high-heeled her way to a big blue beach-cushion in one corner of the patio. Settling down on it, she crossed her long legs and sipped from her glass, watching Lucky solemnly over its rim.

Bruno poured some whisky into a glass and snapped at Fan, "You forgot the ice."

"I thought we were going to save the ice for the party."

Bruno grimaced. "That damn party. I forgot." He handed Lucky the glass. "Here. You got this coming to you. It's good whisky. You don't need any ice."

Lucky took the glass. Having a feeling that the honeymoon was just about over, he took a long swallow from it. The stuff burned going down, but it did good things to his insides.

Bruno braced his legs apart and planted his meaty fists on his broad hips. "Okay, Lucky. Let's get down to business. Where are the stones?"

Lucky drew a slow breath. "I haven't the faintest idea what you're talking about," he told him quietly, and took another fast swallow from the glass.

"I think you do. You got a reputation for being a smart guy."

"Pretend I'm dumb."

Trenker started to edge toward Lucky. Bruno shoved him back with his arm.

"Okay," Bruno rasped. "Here it is. The Wertham jewelry firm got looted over three years ago up in San Francisco. Almost half a million bucks' worth of stones missing. Mort Connors was one of the few guys that could've pulled that kind of job, only he was collared and sent up right after the Wertham job—on another rap. I figured he must've hid the stones some place, on account of they never turned up all the time he was in the can. So when he got out, I sicked Fan on him."

Lucky glanced at Fan. She was still sipping at her whisky and gazing at him narrowed-eyed over her glass.

"Turned out I'd been right," Bruno went on. "Connors had done the Wertham job, all right. And stashed the stones somewheres in Mexico. He went down after 'em, and took Fan along. Only he didn't take her all the way to where he had the loot hid. And he didn't bring all the stones back with him. Only this one."

Bruno took from his pocket a large ruby, let Lucky look at it.

"Just this one, so he could prove he had the rest to anybody in the market for 'em."

Lucky eyed the ruby. "What happened? You get overeager and knock Mort Connors off, thinking he had all the stones on him?"

"It was an accident." Bruno turned his head and glared at Trenker. "Connors got cute, and Trenker here got clumsy."

"Too bad," Lucky said quietly. "And now nobody knows where the rest of those jewels are?"

"You do," Bruno told him flatly.

"So everyone seems to think. Why?"

"Connors rented a car in Agua Caliente and went the rest of the way alone to where he had the loot hid. He just took this ruby, left the rest of it where it was. But he couldn't get his car started again, and *then* you came along and gave him a lift. He told Fan about that, and she told me."

Lucky looked at Fan again. "You're a handy girl for a guy to have around. As long as the guy doesn't let you get behind him."

She said nothing.

"So there's almost a half-million worth of loot," Bruno said softly, "buried somewhere right where you picked up Connors."

"And I'm the only one who knows where that is," Lucky murmured. He took another swallow from his glass. The whisky warmed his stomach but it didn't do anything else for him. His brain was cold. "Interesting."

"Yeah. Ain't it? So all you got to do now is tell me where you picked Connors up. Then we all go down there and hunt around till we find it and dig it up."

"That is *one* thing I could do," Lucky admitted softly.

"The *only* thing," Bruno growled. "You can't go get those stones for yourself, Lucky. Because I won't let you. It was all mine, on account of I'm the one who figured Connors pulled the Wertham job. But now you're in on it. Okay. So you're in. That's because I'm dealing you in."

"If I let you deal me in."

Bruno looked down at Lucky for a time. What was in his eyes made Lucky's stomach knot. He was quite sure of one thing: he wasn't about to tell Bruno what he wanted to know. It was the only lever he had to work with in getting out of the murder rap. Once he was no longer the only one who knew, he would no longer have the lever. But that still left the problem of how to get into a position where he could use the lever.

Bruno reached behind him and seized the bottle. He poured Lucky's glass full. "Listen, gambler. You got no out. You've got to co-operate. You'll get a fair cut of the take. Anybody could tell you my word's good."

"I'd like to ask Mort Connors for his opinion on that."

Bruno's face darkened. "That was an accident, like I told you. I'm a fair guy. You know my reputation."

Lucky put his glass down on the table. He'd had enough. He couldn't afford to have his thinking dulled now. "All I know about you is that you used to be something or other in Detroit."

"I was something *big* in Detroit. Like I'm gonna be out here. I've put out a lot of dough tryin' to get set up here. I need more. Those Wertham stones'll do the trick. And you're gonna help me find 'em."

"I'll make a deal with you," Lucky told him slowly. "I'll take you to where I picked up Mort Connors—after you give the guy that knocked off Connors to the cops."

Trenker made a disagreeable sound deep in his throat and came at Lucky. Lucky had expected that, and he kicked Trenker in the shin, hard. Trenker stumbled in mid-stride, with a cry of pain, and bent down to clutch at his hurt. Lucky shot up off the couch and slammed Trenker in the temple with the sharp point of his elbow. Trenker showed the whites of his eyes and collapsed.

Lucky twisted toward Bruno. Not fast enough. Despite his huge bulk, Bruno was incredibly quick of movement. His fist struck the side of Lucky's jaw like an anvil and Lucky's brain exploded. He sprawled sideways across the green-marble table and turned it over as he spilled off it to the flagstone floor of the patio. From some place that seemed a long way off he heard the crash as his glass splintered on the flagstones.

8

After what seemed a long time, Lucky's head stopped whirling enough for him to crawl up onto his hands and knees. He stayed that way, his head hanging. Never had one blow of a fist done that much damage to him before.

Above him, Bruno thundered, "I'm gonna maul the hell out of you if you don't get smart in an awful hurry!"

Fan's voice, slurred and sarcastic, "That's a swell idea, Bruno. Lose your temper while you're at it and maybe you'll kill him. You can always chalk it up as another accident."

"I'll chalk *you* up as an accident," Bruno snarled at her, "if you don't keep your lousy mouth shut." His big hand came down and grabbed Lucky, yanked him up on his feet.

When Bruno let go of him, Lucky swayed, got his balance, and abruptly swung at Bruno with everything he had.

But he was still groggy, and the speed and economy of Bruno's movements would have done justice to a keenly trained lightweight. He just jerked his head a little to one side and Lucky's wild swing slid past his ear. Then Bruno feinted a right at Lucky's eyes and Lucky, whose reactions still weren't working quite right, fell for it, and he raised his arms to ward off the blow. Bruno's left fist rammed into his stomach.

Lucky doubled up as though he'd been slammed across the middle with a telephone pole. His knees landed on the stone floor so hard he heard the impact. He kept doubling over, clutching at his stomach till his forehead was resting on the stones, then he fell over on his side and lay there, curled in a tight ball.

"You gonna co-operate?" Bruno demanded softly. "Or do we keep this up?"

Lucky was in too much pain to answer. He knew he had never tangled with anyone as formidable as Bruno. The mammoth mobster's combination of speed and brute strength made him invulnerable. Through agony-squinted eyes, Lucky watched Trenker pulling himself back up on his feet. Trenker looked around dazed, then stared down at Lucky with rage contorting his misshapen features. He dragged a switchblade knife from his pocket, pressed the button and the long, slim blade snicked out.

"Put it away, Trenker," Bruno snapped. "You loused things up once for us. You ain't gonna do it again."

Trenker hesitated, looked at Bruno. What he saw in Bruno's face made him close the knife and stick it back in his pocket.

"That's it," Bruno growled. "Now get out of the way and stay out of the way. Lucky and me're having a private conference."

Lucky managed to pull himself to a sitting position on the patio floor, hugging his knees to ease the hurt of his middle. Barney leaned against the arch with his arms folded across his chest. The red-haired girl hadn't moved from her beach cushion. Her glass was empty.

"Get smart," Bruno warned Lucky. "Make it easy on all of us. Trenker's just aching for a chance at you. He's got a neat trick that starts with breaking your hands and then . . ."

Fan got up suddenly from her cushion. "You need new dialogue, Bruno," she said with heavy disgust. "That's exactly what you said to Mort. If the rest of this is going to be a repeat, too, I can do without it."

She strode angrily across the terrace and vanished into the house.

Bruno stared after her, then looked down at Lucky. "Come on, get up. I hardly touched you—compared to what I can do."

Lucky shoved himself up and sat on the edge of the couch, breathing slow and hard.

Bruno planted himself in front of him. "Okay," he intoned, "where'd you pick up Mort Connors? This is the last time I ask you. You can still tell me and get a cut of what we find. I got no hard feelings against you. Yet. But you push me, and there won't be enough of you left to care about any cut of the loot. I'm trying to do you a favor, Lucky, so wise up."

While Bruno talked, Lucky carefully braced his feet apart on the flagstones, getting ready. When Bruno stopped talking, Lucky came off the couch as fast as he could, bringing his fist up from his knees.

He caught Bruno in the mouth. His knuckles jarred back in his fist and Bruno went backward, stumbling in his effort to keep from falling. Beyond him, Lucky had a glimpse of Barney, lounging against the arch and watching with unconcern. Lucky went after Bruno, knowing that if he gave him a chance to recover, he was going to be taken apart. He caught Bruno against the wall and hooked a punch at his chin but Bruno ducked and Lucky's fist bruised itself against his bulging forehead.

Bruno took it without a murmur, slid away from the wall with Lucky after him. Lucky struck at the mobster's wide middle, but Bruno side-stepped the punch and clouted Lucky in the ear with the flat of his hand. There were wild shrieking noises inside Lucky's brain and his vision blurred. He tried to get at the mobster's chin with another punch, but Bruno danced away as nimbly as Fred Astaire, completely recovered from that first surprise punch.

Then Bruno was coming back at Lucky, that beefy face empty of expression. Lucky tried to dodge away, but Bruno was too fast for him and he hit Lucky in the chest so hard it felt as though his lungs were being collapsed. Bruno's other fist connected with the side of Lucky's head. Lucky heard a click inside his skull and sagged backward against a pillar, his arms dangling uselessly.

Bruno's huge hands grabbed Lucky's shoulders and held him up. "Now tell me!" His voice was a deadly whisper. "Now!"

Lucky looked at him with blurred eyes and managed to bring his fist up and hit Bruno in the stomach, but there was no strength at all left in him. Bruno didn't even grunt. He began shaking Lucky like a rag doll, his face turning purple.

"Talk, you stupid jerk!"

Bruno's hand grabbed Lucky's shirt front and his other hand slapped the side of his face. Searing pain ripped through Lucky's cheek and he tasted his own blood in his mouth. He hung there, held up only by the strength of the hand clutching his shirt.

"Where's that loot? Where'd you pick Connors up?"

Bruno backhanded Lucky so hard that he was torn loose from the mobster's grasp and went down on his side on the cool flagstones. He wondered idly why he was still conscious.

Bruno knelt beside him and, seizing his face in his big hands, turned Lucky's head so that Lucky was looking up into his bloodshot eyes. "You're gonna tell me. You know you are. You're the only one that knows. I'm gonna find out if I have to keep going with you all night!"

Fan came back through the arch.

"You have a loud voice, Bruno. Your guests are asking me what's going on. Since most of them are the legit people you're trying to impress in this town, I don't think they'd understand."

From his knees, Bruno stared up at her blankly. "Guests?"

"Your party. Remember? Some of the people you invited just showed up."

Bruno let go of Lucky. He stood up slowly, pulling his mind back into place. "Tell 'em I'll be right in," he whispered finally. He dusted the knees of his trousers with his hands.

The girl glanced at Lucky for a second, then turned and left quickly. Bruno reached down with both hands and hauled Lucky to his feet. Lucky's legs wobbled under him.

"Stand, dammit!"

After a while, Lucky managed it and Bruno let go of him. Lucky swayed, but he didn't fall.

"Barney," Bruno snapped, "take him to your room. Lock the door and shut the blinds and stay there with him. When the damn party's over, I'll talk to him again."

Barney nodded, pushed away from the arch against which he'd been leaning.

Bruno looked at Trenker. "You go along and make sure Lucky's settled in nice and quiet. Then you can come back out and join me."

Barney took out his revolver and aimed it at Lucky. "Let's go."

Trenker led the way and Lucky followed him, with Barney and his gun bringing up the rear. They went to the other end of the patio, through an open doorway, and down a wide marble hall. Lucky had the feeling he should try to do something to attract the attention of those "legit" guests who were in some other part of the house, but his mind was too scrambled for straight thinking.

Barney's room was small, but elegantly furnished. There were three big gilt-framed mirrors. It seemed kind of feminine for Barney.

Trenker drew the venetian blinds shut while Barney motioned to Lucky with his gun. "Get on the bed."

Lucky stretched face-down on the narrow bed. The mattress was soft and deep, and with intense relief Lucky let his aching head and body sink into it.

Trenker taped Lucky's wrists behind him and left the room. Barney locked the door, sat down on a chair behind a small marble-topped table. From a drawer in the table he took out a pack of cards. He put the gun down where he could grab it in a split second, and began a game of solitaire, raising his eyes occasionally to make sure Lucky was staying put on the bed.

For a time Lucky gave himself up to his pain and weariness. But as his strength and his senses returned, his mind began to work to some purpose again. In no way did he show this. He remained sprawled inertly on the bed, allowing Barney to get used to his appearance of helplessness.

Lucky forced himself to ignore the throbbing in his head, the ache in his middle. He knew that the luck which had always played such a big part in his life was operating again, otherwise he'd still be out on that patio with Bruno knocking him around. Luck had sent him this postponement, in the guise of the party, and it was up to him to make use of it. Luck never stuck long to anyone who didn't know how to improve on what it brought him.

Lucky rolled over on his side, clenching his teeth against the pain the movement renewed in his hurt body.

"Can I have a drink of water?" he asked Barney. His voice didn't sound like his voice.

"No." Barney went on with his solitaire.

Lucky sprawled on his back and stared up at the bright orange ceiling. A jolt of pain went through his head, then ebbed. Time crawled menacingly onward, using itself up. From another part of the house, the party began making sounds loud enough to be heard in Barney's room. The sounds gradually got louder and drunker. Lucky listened to that party and loved the sounds it made. He didn't want the party ever to end.

But it would end. And with it would end his reprieve.

Lucky forced himself to a sitting position, in spite of the hurt in his middle.

Barney immediately put down the cards and picked up his revolver. "Lay back down."

"Solitaire's not much fun," Lucky said. "How about making it two-handed stud?"

"No. Lay down or I'll knock you out."

Lucky let his head fall back against the pillows, stared up at the ceiling again. He didn't let himself get discouraged. You had to be stubborn about these things, and Lucky had a stubborn streak deeper than most.

He considered what Barney had said about knocking him out. Barney would have to get up from that chair and come over to the bed to do that. Lucky tested the adhesive tape binding his wrists behind him. They'd been taped expertly. It would take a lot of time to get loose—maybe too much time. He thought about the fact that his legs weren't tied. If Barney came over to the bed, he could . . .

There was a knock on the door. Lucky stiffened and sat up quickly again.

Barney dropped the cards and took up his gun and stood. Putting the gun in his jacket pocket and keeping his hand in the pocket with the gun, he went to the door and unlocked it. He opened the door a crack, then wider.

Fan Ferguson came into the room. She was clutching a colorful cloth handbag in both hands, and she had a sleepy, drunken look to her.

Barney shut the door behind her quickly. "What do you want?" he demanded.

"Don't get fresh, Barney," she slurred. "Bruno sent me. He wants you."

"Wants me?" Barney jerked his head in Lucky's direction as Lucky swung his feet off the bed, bracing them on the floor, ready to take quick advantage of anything that developed. "What about him?"

"Bruno said I should watch him till you get back. Don't worry. He's tied, ain't he? And you can give me your gun to hold on him."

Barney stared at her. "The hell you say. Is Bruno goin' nuts or is he just plain drunk? He knows I can't . . ."

The redhead shrugged and said, "I'll tell Bruno you won't come."

"Yeah. You just tell him that. I don't believe you anyway. What're you tryin' to pull?"

Lucky decided that this could be the moment for which luck had spared him. He stood up, cleared his throat and said, "If you want my opinion . . ."

Barney twisted around toward him and snapped, "Get back on that bed, you . . ."

The instant his back was to Fan, she seemed to go pale under her tan. Lucky saw her swing her handbag up and over with both hands and all her strength. It crashed down on the back of Barney's skull with a vicious *thunk.*

Barney staggered forward and blundered into his card table, went over sideways and sprawled on his back on the floor. One arm swung over and the knuckles of his hand cracked against the table leg. He lay perfectly still, his mouth wide open and his eyes open just enough to show thin slits of white; but he was still breathing.

Fan's handbag had split open with the impact. She stepped forward, opened her hands and let it drop on Barney's chest. What spilled out of the bag was a solid bronze bookend. Then she crossed the room toward Lucky, suddenly looking not at all drunk.

Lucky turned his back to her. Her fingers worked quickly at the tape binding his wrists. In a minute she had tugged the last of it loose.

While Lucky wordlessly rubbed his wrists to get the circulation going again, the redhead knelt beside Barney and took the revolver out of his pocket. She stood up with it, looking at Lucky.

"Do you know how to handle one of these things?" she asked him.

"Uh-huh."

"Good. Then you take it."

And she gave him the gun.

9

Fan went to the door and opened it a crack, peered out, then motioned to Lucky. "Come on," she whispered tensely.

Lucky glanced down at Barney. Nothing to worry about there; the stocky gunman would stay on ice for at least fifteen minutes more. Lucky stepped over him and followed the redhead out into the corridor with Barney's revolver gripped tightly in his fist.

The corridor was empty. The noise of the party came from their left, in the direction of the patio and living room. Fan hurried to their right and Lucky followed her, taut-nerved. They left the house through a rear door, went quickly down a stretch of open lawn into a grove of palms.

In the shadows there Fan paused and looked at him. "Did you come by car?"

"Uh-huh."

"Where is it?"

He told her. They hurried on through the trees, leaving the house behind. They skirted a parking area jammed with cars, took a gravel path down to where the high wall ran along the rear of the estate. There was a heavy oak door in the wall there, locked by a heavy iron bar on the inside. Fan worked the bar out of its wall socket while Lucky watched the house on the slope above them. He saw no sign of pursuit.

They went out through the doorway.

"Hurry," Fan breathed shakily. "If Bruno finds Barney before we get away . . ."

Lucky strode alongside the wall so fast Fan had to run to keep up with him. They reached the Chrysler, got in and seconds later Lucky had the car out on the road and was driving away, angling south. Beside him Fan slumped back in the seat as though all the courage had suddenly leaked out of her. Neither said a word as Lucky put miles between them and Bruno's house. After a time Fan got a pack of cigarettes from the pocket of her toreador pants, lit one and began smoking it with deep, nervous drags.

Lucky turned off the road they were traveling into another highway, followed it for about five miles and branched into still another road. He kept driving for about a half hour, then turned into a new dirt road. It led to the crest of a hill overlooking a sprawling housing development in an intermediary stage of construction.

Lucky set the brake, switched off the lights, and caged one of Fan's cigarettes. He lit it, sucked in a deep drag of smoke, let it trickle out slowly while he experienced a gradual relaxation of tension. As he unwound, he became conscious again of the various aches and bruises from Bruno's beating. He leaned forward to ease the hurt, rested his forearms on the steering wheel and looked at Fan.

"Thanks for getting me out of there. You probably saved my life. At considerable risk to yourself."

"Yes," she acknowledged quietly. "I did."

"You're in a position to do me one more favor. You saw Mort Connors get killed?"

"Uh-huh."

"How'd it happen?"

She told him.

"I'd like you to tell that to the cops," Lucky said. "It would get me and a couple friends of mine out of a bad corner."

But even as he suggested it, he knew it wasn't going to be that easy. Fan had saved him from Bruno; but she hadn't done it out of tender charity.

He watched Fan take a last drag at her cigarette and flick it out the open window of the car. "You're going a little too fast for me," she said.

"I had the feeling you'd think so."

"Like you said, Lucky, I took a big chance helping you. You owe me for that—and not just your thanks."

"I take it you're interested in a more tangible token of my gratitude. Say that loot of Mort Connors's?"

She grinned. "You take it correctly."

"Bruno would only have given you a small cut. With me, you figure on getting it all—in exchange for getting me out from under a murder rap. That it?"

"I'm not greedy," Fan informed him calmly. "I don't want it all. We'll split it, fifty-fifty."

"No, you're not greedy. No more greedy than Blackbeard the pirate."

"Maybe. It's an attitude I've acquired from knocking myself against the sharp edges of this lousy town."

"We can do without the sob-story routine," Lucky told her. "I know your history. Like thousands of other girls too pretty for their own good, you came here thinking all you had to do was announce your availability, and the next thing you'd be a movie star. When you found out it wasn't so, you decided you had a legitimate grudge against the world."

Fan laughed softly. "You're so sweet. But I've got to admit you're right. All I want now is a chance to get out of this town—with enough dough to start right some place else."

"Millions of girls manage pretty well without a fortune in dirty money as an ace in the hole."

"That's something else I've acquired from this town," she said coolly. "A taste for the richer slice of life. I got my taste for it from all the flush guys that tried to con me into believing that being nice to them was my ticket to the top. I didn't like them—but I sure liked their apartments, and the places they took me, and the clothes they could afford to buy."

"You make yourself sound like Little Red Riding Hood being victimized by the big-city wolves. I don't think so. If you knew Bruno Rangoni back in Detroit, you couldn't have been any innocent when you arrived out here."

"I wasn't any mob girl back home, if that's what you mean. I grew up in the same slum as Bruno, only he'd graduated from it before I was in my teens. He was a big hero around our neighborhood. One of the boys I used to go with worked for Bruno for a time—until he got careless and ended up in State Prison. That's how I happened to meet Bruno a couple of times. That's all there was to it, until Bruno spotted me at Seely's Club and decided he had a use for me."

Lucky tossed the glowing butt of his cigarette out of the car. "And you decided you were ripe for anything that smelled of big dough."

"I wish you'd stop sounding so moralistic, Lucky. It doesn't suit you. From what I've heard, you play the angles yourself."

"We all play the angles, one way or another. But you play 'em a little too strenuously. Your angle got Mort Connors killed."

She was silent for a few moments. Then she said, "It wasn't supposed to happen that way. If Bruno had wanted to do it the rough way, he wouldn't have needed me. All he'd have had to do was snatch Mort and rough him into telling where he had those Wertham jewels hidden. But he wanted to do it smooth, nobody getting hurt."

"How'd you manage to leech onto Connors?"

"Bruno had him followed from the moment he got out of prison. Mort went bar-crawling to celebrate his release. I went into one of the bars and let him pick me up. It wasn't hard."

"I'm sure it wasn't. After all that time inside, you must have looked like paradise to him."

"I guess so. The idea was for me to see if I could find out where he had the loot. But he was too careful to tell me. And when he went down to Mexico after it, he only took me part way with him. He showed me that ruby when he got back, and I just assumed he had the rest of them, too. But as it turned out, he didn't."

"So now he's dead, and nobody knows where they are."

"Nobody—except you."

Lucky shook his head. "I don't either."

"Mort told me he parked that rented car and went to where he'd buried them. Then he couldn't get the car started again. That means those stones are buried somewhere near wherever you picked him up."

Lucky thought about that Scuba diving equipment Mort Connors had had with him. It didn't tie in with Fan's statement that the gems were "buried." But he let that wait for the moment. "The gems could be anywhere inside a mile or two of the spot where I picked up Connors. It might take us a long time to find them."

"So, it'll take time." She turned slightly in the seat beside him, looked at him appraisingly. "I think we might even manage to enjoy being together. Don't you?"

Fan's obvious female attributes were not lost on Lucky, but he didn't trust her any farther than he could throw her. "I'm afraid I'd be too nervous to fully appreciate the possibilities. I'd keep thinking of what happened to Mort."

"That was an accident," she snapped. "I told you that."

Lucky nodded. "You told me. I've had my share of accidents, too, ever since meeting you. I can do without more of them."

"Get this straight," she told him bluntly. "It's your only way out of that murder rap. After we get the loot, I'll tell the cops it was Trenker—not you—who killed Mort. Not before. I want to get something out of the chance I'll be taking. The law might even charge me with being an accessory."

"No. Not if you help pin the murder charge where it belongs. They trade you immunity for turning state's evidence. But the cops won't take kindly to the idea of you keeping those gems."

"They won't have to know we found them. Anyway, I'll worry about that when we get to it. Even if I have to give them up, there's still the reward for turning them in. The company that insured them has never withdrawn its offer of thirty thousand for their return."

"You seem to have it all figured out," Lucky admitted.

"Yes, I do."

There was nothing Lucky could do but go along with her. He was quite certain that Fan hoped to get all of that loot for herself if she could, and give him the slip without taking the real story of Mort Connors's death to the law. But if he wasn't smart enough to outmaneuver her when the time came, he deserved to be taken.

Actually, she wasn't the only one he'd have to outmaneuver. Her uncorroborated statement that Trenker was the one who killed Mort Connors wouldn't stand up in court. She could be lying, and against her statement would be the evidence of his fingerprints on the clip of the murder gun. But if he could also persuade Bruno to toss Trenker to the cops in exchange for those stones . . .

It would require a lot of sneaky planning to swing it. But if he played his cards right, it could just possibly be done. Only he needed the cards first. And the cards in this case were those stones. Fan might be able to help him get them.

Without thinking about what he was doing, Lucky got out the silver dollar, began flipping it as he considered the odds. Fan watched the spinning coin, her eyes widening as she saw the way it kept coming up heads.

"All right," Lucky said finally.

"I knew you were smart. We'll get along."

"I'm sure we will," Lucky said quietly. "Now to business. Are you sure Mort Connors said he had the jewels buried? Did he actually use the word *buried,* or did you just assume that was what he'd done with them?"

She frowned, puzzled. "He said they were buried. Why?"

Lucky rubbed the line of his jaw with the silver dollar, thinking about it. "He may have been playing it cagey with you," he decided. "Or else he was using the word wrong, the way some people say buried treasure when referring to sunken treasure."

"You've lost me," Fan said. "What are you talking about?"

"I think Mort Connors hid them in the ocean. His car was stalled between the road and the beach. And he'd just used some Scuba diving gear he'd rented in Agua Caliente. Put that together and it means the gems are in the water, probably anchored to the bottom somehow."

"He didn't say anything to me about renting any diving gear."

"And he didn't tell you where he'd hidden the gems either."

Fan thought about it, nodded. "It's possible. Mort didn't trust me much more than he did anybody."

"I wonder why."

"You keep needling me like that," she told him angrily, "and we're not going to get along."

"Oh, we'll get along. You just keep thinking about the pot at the end of the rainbow."

She let that pass. "How do we find it, if it *is* in the ocean?"

"Same way Connors did. Diving for it. There wasn't a boat of any kind in sight along the beach where I picked him up. So the loot can't be sunk too far from shore. We'll start from the place where his car was stalled, and work out from there."

"That still leaves the problem of getting there," Fan said. "You're too hot to get through customs at the border."

"So's this car," he told her. "We'll have to go down by boat."

"Know where we can get one?"

Lucky dropped the silver dollar back in his pocket and nodded. "Same place we're going to pick up the diving gear."

He switched on the lights, let out the brake, and headed for the coast. He drove fast. Dawn wasn't far off.

No lights showed in any of the houses around the little cove, and Max's clapboard building was as dark as the rest. Lucky parked behind the building, strode to the rear door and knocked.

There was no answer. He knocked again, louder.

Light went on behind one of the second-floor windows. Moments later Lucky heard Max's heavy footsteps coming down the steps inside. There was the sound of the lock being turned and the door opened a few inches, cautiously. Max peeked out.

"Oh, no . . ." Max whispered, a sick look coming over his face as he saw Lucky standing there.

"I'm afraid so," Lucky said, sympathizing.

"Have a heart, Lucky! I begged you not to come back. I can't afford . . ."

"I'm not staying this time, Max. I need some Scuba gear. And a cabin cruiser with the fuel tanks full. Water and food, too."

"You expect me to let you make a getaway in one of *my* boats?"

"They're all insured, aren't they?"

"Yeah. But . . ."

"So in the morning you report one of them stolen. You'll either get it back from me, or get enough from the insurance to buy a new one."

Max hesitated, chewing on that. "And if I don't?"

"We both know I've got you in a squeeze. You have to." Lucky hooked his thumbs in his belt, drawing Max's eyes down to the butt of the gun stuck in it. "Let's not make me threaten you, Max. Do it for old times' sake, and when I get this phony rap off me I'll make it up to you."

Max took his eyes from the gun with an effort. "You'd better." He sighed and shook his head. "I think I'm gonna move to some other town. Too many people know me around here. I can't turn legit even when I want to."

An hour later Lucky, with Fan at the wheel beside him, was sailing a twenty-eight-foot inboard cabin cruiser out to sea. By dawn, the land was out of sight below the ocean horizon astern. Lucky spoked the wheel to port and nosed the boat south, toward Mexican waters.

It was shortly after dawn, also, when Trenker drove the black Cadillac sedan out of Bruno's estate and headed for the coastal highway leading south to Mexico.

Beside Trenker, Barney turned around and looked at Bruno, whose bulk took up half the rear seat. "I sure hope you're right, Bruno. If they ain't gone down there . . ."

"That's where they've gone," Bruno stated flatly. "After Connors's loot. You don't think Fan busted him loose for charity, do you?"

Barney fingered a large and tender lump on the back of his head. "When I get my hands on her . . ."

"You won't," Bruno told him. "After we get the stones, you and Trenker can let off steam killing Lucky Santell any way you want. But that double-crossing redhead's gonna be all *mine*."

10

Lucky kept the boat cruising south out of sight of land all that day. The rolling surge of the Pacific Ocean was heavy out that far, and a number of times it required all of Lucky's skill to keep from being swamped. The boat was sound, responding beautifully to his handling. Each time it roller-coastered down into the hollow of the swells and buried its bow in a slope of water, it somehow managed to wallow its way back up to the crest.

But the continual rolling and pitching of the boat soon took its toll of Fan. Looking green and clenching her teeth to keep her stomach out of her throat, she sprawled face-down on the bunk in the open deckhouse. For hours afterward, she stayed that way, leaving Lucky to himself.

Toward noon, the sea grew calmer, the wind died down and the swells evened out till the boat was knifing across a smooth, rippled surface. Lucky worked the throttle and coaxed a few more knots out of the engine. He watched the horizon ahead, his eyes slitted against the sun glare shimmering on the surface. The sea had always meant escape for him. If it weren't for Andamo and Rovac, he'd have been tempted to just keep going and forget about ever going back to try squaring himself with the law.

In his absorption with the boat and the sea, it was some time before he realized that Fan was back beside him. He looked at her, saw that she had won her fight with her stomach. She looked a bit drawn and tired, but otherwise normal.

"Feel all right?"

She nodded. "I didn't think I was going to live. For a while there I hoped I wouldn't."

"That was a pretty quick recovery," he told her. "You'll be all right from now on."

She looked around at the circle of ocean. "Are we almost there?"

He shook his head. "Got a long way to go. A boat's a lot slower than a car. We won't make it till sometime tomorrow morning—and we'll have to keep going all night to make it by then. But the sooner we get there and get those gems, the less chance of our being found and taken."

"The cops won't be looking for you down there."

"I wasn't thinking about the cops," he told her grimly. "It's Bruno and his hoods we've got to worry about."

"Bruno?" Fear entered her eyes as she said the name.

"Yeah. Did you forget? He knows Connors took you down as far as Agua Caliente, and went farther south alone from there. So he knows where to start looking. From now on time's running against us. The longer we take, the longer he has to find us."

He didn't have to go into detail. She understood the urgency as well as he did. "If Bruno ever gets his hands on me . . ." she murmured.

"Uh-huh. It won't be pretty. You know, you can cut that risk anytime you want. Just say so, and we'll turn around and head back for L. A. You tell the cops your story about how Mort Connors died, I'm off the hook, and Bruno and his boys are in a cell where they can't get at you." Actually, it wouldn't be that simple. But he knew she wouldn't go for it anyway.

Her face went stubborn. "No. I want those jewels. I've already done too much for them to back off now."

Lucky shrugged. "Suit yourself. But I'm going to need help with this boat. I didn't have any sleep last night and if I don't get some rest soon, I'll conk out. You'll have to spell me at the wheel for a while."

"I don't know anything about handling a boat."

"Now's the time to learn, kid. It's easy. You can leave the throttle alone. Just watch the compass there, and keep the needle pointing the way it is now. Here, take the wheel and I'll show you."

She took the wheel spokes in her hands timidly, as though afraid the boat would suddenly turn over when it realized an amateur was at the helm. But she was a bright pupil, and caught on quickly. Within half an hour, she was able to keep on course.

"That's all there is to it," he told her, grinning at how proudly she handled the wheel. "And if you spot trouble, just give me a yell. I sleep light."

"How about something to eat before you take your nap? I never thought I'd be hungry again, but I am."

He nodded and took the wheel back from her. She went below to the tiny galley to heat up some of the hotdogs and beans Max had given them. When the meal was ready, Lucky tied the wheel in place and the two of them ate standing beside it and watching the sea.

She studied him curiously as they ate. "How come you know so much about boats?" she asked him finally. "According to that story in the newspaper, you were a gambler for most of your life."

"I was a seaman long before I ever had my first deck of cards in my hand," he told her.

"Must have been an ideal combination, then. Your having that gambling boat."

He nodded. "Ideal."

"According to the newspapers, you've reformed, turned your boat into a floating supper club. Why?"

He shrugged a shoulder. "Guess I'm getting old."

She let her eyes roam boldly up and down his rugged frame. "You don't look it," she murmured softly.

"At the moment," he said, finishing off his last bite of food, "I feel it." He unhitched the wheel, got the boat back a few degrees till it was on course again. "Here, take over. I'm going to pass out."

Fan took the wheel from him, turned her head and watched him make his way down to the cabin. Then she gave her attention to the compass and the sea ahead. But her thoughts still dwelled on the strange man with whom she had formed such a mutually distrustful partnership.

It was mid-morning of the next day when, cruising in along that section of Mexico known as Baja California, Lucky spotted what looked like the place where he'd first seen the late Mort Connors.

"Are you sure?" Fan asked anxiously, gazing shoreward.

Lucky studied the barren islands of black lava rock projecting up out of the sea, examined the outlines of the surf-smashed boulders along the beach itself. "It looks like it. But there's only one way to be sure. I'll go ashore and have a look from there."

He took the boat in between two of the massive jumbles of jagged rock towering out of the water, with the breakers booming against them and breaking into tons of spray and foam. These scattered islands formed a natural breakwater, and between them and the roaring surf on the beach itself was an area of fairly calm water. Lucky hove-to inside this sheltered area and dropped anchor.

They'd seen many other pleasure and commercial vessels on the way down, but there were no other boats in sight here, nor was there anyone on the beach.

"Keep watch," Lucky told Fan, and went down to the cabin to change.

He stripped off his clothes, wriggled into a rubber exposure suit that encased his limbs and body completely from the neck down. Carrying the flippers, he went back up into the cockpit. The hot sunlight started him perspiring immediately inside the rubber of his suit.

"That's some bathing suit," Fan commented.

"The water's always cold along this stretch of the Pacific," he told her, "no matter how warm the air is. It's the Japanese Current coming down from the Aleutians. That's another reason I'm pretty sure Connors couldn't have swum very far from the beach. He didn't have any exposure suit. Skin-diving in this water without one, he'd have frozen if he had to stay in long."

He sat on the transom, pulled the flippers on his feet. "I'm going to have a look ashore first," he told Fan. "Keep your eyes open. If you spot trouble, fire a shot with the gun I left in the cabin."

He pushed himself off and dropped into the water. It was as cold as he'd anticipated, and he felt the shock of it against his exposed hands and face, but the rubber suit insulated the rest of him. The only thing that happened was that he stopped sweating. Using his arms for a lazy breast-stroke to keep his face above water, he did most of the swimming with his legs, the flippers propelling him forward through the sea much faster than he could have managed without them. Nearing the shore, he had to make his way through a jungle of slimy kelp whose stalks clutched at his flippers and whose floating brown leaves plastered themselves against his face. He fought through the mass to the foam of the surf. Feeling the hard sandy bottom under his flipper-clad feet, he stood up and waded ashore through the surging breakers whose din against the beach boulders stuffed his ears.

Reaching a stretch of dry sand among the boulders, Lucky stripped off the flippers and carried them as he trudged farther in. The sand showed no sign of ever having been trod by human feet. Fifty yards in, where the scrub grass grew, Lucky threaded between a cluster of boulders and emerged on the other side in sight of the road. The same road he'd been traveling with Andamo when they'd spotted Mort Connors.

Lucky walked to the road, turned and looked back. It wasn't the place where they'd picked up Connors. Glancing up and down the empty road, he decided to try going north first. He walked with long, rapid strides, once more perspiring inside the rubber exposure suit. The land baked like an oven under the hot noon sun. He was just deciding that he'd better get out of the rubber suit when he suddenly spotted the tree under which Connors's rented car had been stalled.

Lucky took a careful look around, making sure. He studied the road, the tree, the rocks along the beach. It was the right place.

Going to the tree, Lucky made his way from there in a straight line between the shore boulders to the beach. He looked seaward, judging the area in which it was possible for Connors to have dived. That covered a lot of space between the beach and the islands of lava rock out there. It would require an awful lot of looking to find what was probably a small object. Something just big enough to hold a fortune in jewels, anchored in place on the bottom somehow. Maybe

Connors had marked it in such a way that it would be easy to find. He hoped so.

The boat was off to his left. He looked at it, saw the figure of Fan up on the flying bridge beside the wheel.

For a moment he considered making a quick, superficial search—and then trying to persuade her that the loot couldn't be found. But he was sure she wouldn't fall for it. And besides, without it, he'd have no hole card to play against her—and Bruno—nothing with which he could push them into taking the chance of telling the cops how Connors had died. He needed the jewels to force a trade. He had to find Connors's loot.

Lucky put the flippers back on his feet, waded out into the leaping surf till he was waist deep, then he plunged in and swam back to the boat, fighting the slow, powerful surge of the Pacific all the way.

"Find the right spot?" Fan asked excitedly as he climbed aboard.

"I found it," he told her. "But it's only a starting point. I just hope we can find the loot before Bruno and his boys find us."

He took the boat in closer to the spot along the beach from which he'd swum out. Dropping anchor there, he prepared to begin diving. He hooked the canvas lead-weighted belt around his waist, strapped the aqualung tanks on his back. Moving clumsily to the gunwale, he put on the tight face mask, clamped the mouthpiece of the breathing apparatus between his teeth, and switched on the air valve. Then he let himself fall backward into the water.

He kept his knees up against his chest, letting himself sink below the surface, breathing slowly and regularly through the mouthpiece and blowing air through his nose into the face mask to equalize against the depth pressure in his ears. When he touched bottom, he straightened out and looked around.

The water couldn't have been clearer. The strong sunlight above reached right down into it, filling the sea around Lucky with a greenish-golden glow. The hard-packed sand of the bottom reflected the sun's rays back up at him. Above him he could see the keel of the boat as though through slightly wavy glass. His eyes could follow every one of the bubbles streaming out of his breathing apparatus all the way up to the surface. Conditions couldn't have been better for him. If he came anywhere near whatever contained those gems, he should be able to spot it.

Lucky began his underwater search. Keeping close to the bottom, face-down, he kicked his way along effortlessly with the flippers. He started directly beneath the boat and worked his way out from it in ever-increasing circles. The light-reflecting sands swept past under him. An occasional grouper dodged out of his path, and overhead some perch swam curiously through his trail of bubbles. A dark object on the sea floor to his right caught his eye. He swam to it, reached down and picked it up. It was a large shell, weightless in the depths.

He dropped it, went back to his circling path. There were other finds as disappointing. Objects that turned out to be rocks, stones, patches of seaweed, more shells. He investigated each one, though he was pretty certain what he was looking for would be obvious once he saw it, since Connors must have anchored the loot in some way to prevent the tide from taking it out to sea. It might even be a boat of some kind that Connors had sunk with the jewels aboard it.

But a full hour of searching proved fruitless. The perfect light under the surface enabled him to cover a great deal of territory rapidly. Yet he did not find what he was looking for.

Finally, he kicked his way back to the boat and surfaced.

Fan looked at his face as he climbed into the cockpit and stripped off the mask. "No luck?"

He shook his head, glanced out at the area of calm water between the rock islands and the shore. "It's somewhere in here. I'm sure of that. But *somewhere* can take a lot of finding."

"Maybe he buried it under the bottom. Mort did say 'buried'—I'm sure of that. I can still remember his exact words, when he told me about it once. I asked him where it was. All he'd tell me was that it was 'buried in a nice safe hole.' "

Lucky frowned thoughtfully as he shrugged out of the straps and lowered the aqualung tank to the deck. "In a hole? Could be. But if he dug it into the bottom, he'd still most likely have to mark the spot somehow. I'll just have to keep looking and hope he wasn't too cute about the way he marked it." Lucky unhooked the weighted belt. "Right now it's lunch time. I'm starved."

After they ate, Lucky relaxed over a cigarette, smoking it slowly. Then he went into the water again.

This time he took an undersea flashlight with him and went in toward shore, where the jungle of kelp grew. The leaves above cut off the sunlight, and the entangling mass of kelp stems and fronds made a perfect hiding place.

Lucky turned on the flashlight and fought his way through the kelp bed that tried to enmesh him and trap him down below the surface. It was much slower going here. He had to inch his way along the bottom, probing with the flashlight beam every bit of space that might conceal the cache.

It took him the rest of the afternoon to explore the kelp bed. He was still empty-handed when he surfaced, exhausted, at dusk.

This time Fan asked him no questions when he dragged himself on board. She just busied herself in the galley preparing a hot meal, while he got out of the exposure suit and into his dungarees and shirt. After the meal Lucky opened the bottle of bourbon he'd gotten from Max, poured some into a glass and carried it to the deckhouse bunk.

He was lounging wearily, sipping at the bourbon, when Fan came out of the cabin and sat on the edge of the bunk beside him. For a time she was silent, watching him drink.

"I gave you a real hard time of it today," she murmured at last. "Didn't I?"

"It hasn't been fun," he agreed.

"I'm sorry."

"No need to be." He grinned at her crookedly. "Just forget about the jewels and go back with me to talk to the law. That'd make up for everything."

She shook her head slowly. "I can't. I wish I could, but . . . I want those stones. The money they'll bring. You don't understand, but nothing's going to stop me."

"I understand," he told her. "Ever see a woman go off her rocker playing a slot machine? I have. She'll get her mind set on winning the jackpot, and she'll play till her arm's nearly falling off and she's fed every cent she has in the bank into the machine. By then she can't possibly recoup what she's lost, but she's still so blinded by that jackpot that she can't see that. So she goes on playing till she drops. You're like that."

"Thank you, Mr. Freud."

He laughed. "A bit pompous, I admit. But it still fits you."

She sighed, moved a little closer to him. "Maybe we'll find it tomorrow."

"Sure. Or next week."

She touched his eyebrow with the tip of a finger, traced it lightly down his jaw line to the corner of his mouth. "Would it really be such a chore for you, being alone out here with me that long?"

"Trouble is, tomorrow I'll use up the spare aqualung tanks. If we don't find the jewels by tomorrow night, we'll have to chance going into some town along the coast where we can get the tanks refilled."

"That isn't what I asked you," she whispered, her eyes looking deep into his. "I asked you if it has to be such a chore, being stuck out here alone with me."

"The circumstances," he told her, "are scarcely romantic."

"They could be," she whispered. She pressed against him, her luscious lips taking possession of his mouth.

Despite the day, the problems, Lucky felt a tingle spreading all through him. When it came to romance, he admitted, she knew what she was doing and while she was at it, it was hard to think about anything else.

Her lips detached from his, reluctantly. She drew back about an inch. Her eyes were soft, warm. . . .

Lucky looked at her for just a second, set his glass down on the deck, put his arms around her, and pulled her to him. . . .

Barney came out of the garage on the edge of Agua Caliente and walked back to the car in which Bruno and Trenker waited.

He shook his head. "No luck. It's the garage where Connors rented the car, all right. But Connors didn't say anything to the guy about where he got stuck."

Bruno's brutal mouth tightened. "And I guess he ain't seen anybody come through here that looked like Lucky and Fan?"

"No. Nobody we've asked has, Bruno. So maybe they didn't come down here after all."

"They came down here," Bruno stated flatly. "They're after those stones. Maybe they bypassed this town, knowing we'd be comin' down here looking for 'em. But they're down here somewhere."

He stared out of the car at the stretch of road leading south. "We sure can't hunt every damn mile of this lousy country for 'em." He thought about that for a while. Then he said, half to himself, "Maybe somebody down in Ensenada's seen 'em. I know some hard guys down there. I'll pass 'em the word to look around." He looked at Barney again. "You pass the word around this town. Anybody spotting a guy and girl that look like Fan and Lucky gets five hundred bucks for tipping us in time to grab 'em. Got that?"

Barney nodded. "Half a grand's a lot of dough."

"Half a million's a lot more. That's what those stones are worth. I'm gonna get 'em. And settle accounts with a lousy gambler and a two-timing redhead."

11

Lucky spent the entire next day in his search. He abandoned his circling of the area and concentrated on hunches. The shore breakers he avoided. Connors wouldn't have needed an aqualung in shallow water. Instead, Lucky went out to the underwater reefs linking the huge islands of lava rock.

The rubber exposure suit protected him from the jagged projections of the reef as he worked his way through the tangles of kelp and seaweed growing from it and slid on its slippery eel grass while probing into its cranies and drowned caves.

He came across a lot of abalone and some eels and the wreck of an ancient coastal schooner. He even returned to the boat with a couple of fresh-caught lobsters for dinner. He used up his strength pitting himself against the twisting pull of the surge through the reefs, and he used up the last of the air in the spare tanks. But he did not find Connors's fortune in stolen gems.

He waited till after sunset that evening, then upped anchor and took the boat out to get the aqualung tanks refilled. His nerves didn't appreciate the chance he was taking but it had to be done.

There weren't many towns along this stretch of Mexican coast equipped to supply skin-divers, and in any one of them Bruno could be waiting. But it was less of a risk than trying for California where everybody from the shore police to the Coast Guard would be looking for him. There was nothing to do but wear Barney's revolver inside his belt under his shirt, remain alert, and chance it.

He took the boat north along the coast with the throttle wide open, eager to get in, out and back to comparative safety as quickly as possible. The bows creamed through the dark water and trailed a wake of milky foam that went straight astern for over a hundred feet before the current got it and turned it snaky. Overhead a velvet black sky was crammed with glistening stars.

Fan stayed beside Lucky, bracing her feet apart against the slight heaving of the deck under them. As the boat rolled her body touched his, then swayed away, then touched him again. She gazed dreamily at the dark sea and sky. "God, isn't it beautiful?" she whispered.

"Uh-huh. Shame there's so many greedy people around to spoil it."

She didn't take offense. "You know," she murmured, "when all this is over, and we have the money, we could really have a fine time together. For a while at least. Go some place new—like Europe. Haven't you ever wanted to go to Europe?"

"I've been."

"Is it as wonderful as they say?"

"I wouldn't know. I went at a bad time. There was a war going on."

He cut to starboard as the lights of Agua Caliente came into view. Taking the boat in past a marina, he eased the port bow over against the piling-fenders of a charter fishing-boat pier. He was making the boat fast to the pier when a squat, dark-faced dockman in overalls and a dirty yachting cap emerged from a shack on the dock and strolled out toward him.

"You wish to buy mooring for the night?" the dockman asked in thickly accented English.

"No. Only until I can get my aqualung tanks pumped full with compressed air," Lucky told him in Mexican Spanish. "Are you equipped to do the job?"

The squat dockman looked from Lucky to the red-haired girl in the cockpit, then back to Lucky. *"Sí,"* he said slowly, slipping into his more accustomed Spanish. "But it cannot be done until morning. Until then, you can leave your fine boat here and enjoy the city. Our mooring charge is not high."

"I don't have the time to wait," Lucky told him. "I will pay you two times the normal charge for a quick job. Now."

The dockman raised his shoulders in an unhappy shrug. "I cannot. I am sorry. The equipment is locked up for the night. Only my boss, the owner of this pier, has the key."

His glance flicked to Fan again, returned to Lucky quickly. "There is a place where it can be done for you tonight. If you wish, you and the lady can wait here while I take your tanks there, get them filled for you, and bring them back. For a small consideration, of course."

Lucky shook his head. "I can take them myself. I know of a place where it can be done, too."

He was thinking of that sporting goods shop on the edge of town, the one from which Connors had rented his diving gear.

He slipped the dockman a dollar bill. "Find a taxicab for me."

As the dockman went off the pier, Lucky climbed back into the boat. "You'd better stay here till I get back," he told Fan. "We're too easy to spot together."

"All right," she agreed, though it was obvious she was uneasy about being left alone.

"Stay out of sight in the boat till I get back," he told her quietly.

"What about you? If Bruno's here and spots you . . ."

"I'll have to take my chances." He picked up the tanks, hung them over his wide shoulders and hauled himself up onto the pier with them. An ancient automobile with the word *TAXI* painted on its side rattled up to the end of the pier. The dockman got out, held the rear door open for Lucky and helped him get the tanks inside. Lucky told the driver where he wanted to go.

The dockman watched the taxi rattle away, then looked toward the boat. The red-haired girl had left the cockpit, disappeared into the cabin. The dockman hurried to his shack. . . .

There *might* be a slower taxicab in town, Lucky decided as it bumped and rattled its way toward his destination at a snail's pace, but it wasn't likely. It took what seemed an eternity to go the short distance to the place on the edge of town. Lucky climbed out, dragged out the tanks, paid the driver and told him not to bother to wait. He was quite sure that any cab he picked up for the return trip would be faster than this one.

The sports equipment shop beside the garage was open. Lucky carried the tanks inside and set them on the floor. A tiny gnome of a man with a wizened face came out through a curtained door behind the counter. *"Sí, Señor?"*

Lucky gestured at the aqualung tanks, told him what he needed done.

The man behind the counter was gazing at him strangely, as though lost in some thought of his own.

"Well?" Lucky snapped. "Can you do it?"

The tiny man seemed to shake himself out of his thought. "No," he murmured apologetically. "This we cannot do. But they will do it for you in the garage next door."

Lucky thanked him for the information and carried the tanks out to the garage.

The garageman was under a car fixing something. He promised to attend to the tanks as soon as he finished the repair job on the car. He wouldn't be at it much longer, he assured Lucky.

There was nothing to do but wait. To ease his tension, Lucky strolled out of the garage, began prowling around it. As he passed the front of the sports store, he glanced in. The owner wasn't in sight. He'd apparently returned to the back room behind the curtained doorway. Lucky thought about the wizened-faced man; the odd way he had looked at him.

Maybe it was just his nerves getting the better of him, but there was one way to reassure himself. Lucky went quietly between the store and the garage. In the back, he saw that the room behind the store had a door and a single window. He looked through the window.

The room inside was a combination kitchen-bedroom. The store owner stood in a corner with his back toward Lucky, the receiver of the wall phone in his hand. He wasn't speaking into the mouthpiece; he was just listening through the earpiece.

Lucky silently turned the doorknob. It wasn't locked. He opened the door and stepped inside, quickly closed the door behind him.

The man at the phone twisted around, his wizened features sagging with shock when he saw who had come in. Lucky crossed the room with four fast strides, snatched the receiver from his little hand. The tiny man just stood there staring at him, rooted by his fear. Lucky put the receiver to his ear. There was no voice speaking through it, just the sound of ringing at the other end of the line. The connection hadn't gone through yet.

Lucky hung up the phone. The store owner suddenly unfroze, tried to bolt away from him but Lucky caught him by the front of his shirt with one hand and held him there.

"Who were you phoning?" he demanded.

The man's mouth opened and closed like a fish gasping for breath, but no words came out.

"Bruno Rangoni? Is that who you were calling?"

But the man's vocal cords were too fear-paralyzed for him to answer.

There was no point in trying to beat the truth out of him, Lucky decided. Whoever he'd been phoning, he hadn't managed to get an answer.

It was quite possible that the man's intended call had been a perfectly innocent one, but Lucky couldn't afford to count on it. He pushed the man into a heavy wooden chair. "Sit there."

He went to a bureau against one wall, opened drawers till he found what he was after—a bunch of neckties. The man was watching him with terrified eyes, not moving as Lucky tied his wrists and ankles to the legs of the chair. Lucky gagged him with two more neckties, doing it carefully so that the man would not smother himself in his efforts to get free. He stepped back and viewed his handiwork with satisfaction. If the man had recognized him from a description and tried to tip Bruno, he'd stay on ice this way long enough for Lucky to get his tanks pumped full, return to the boat and sail away. If he was innocent of what Lucky suspected, he'd manage to work himself free eventually and no harm done.

"Don't try to get free," Lucky warned him. He raised the shirt that hung over his belt and let the man see the butt of the gun there. "I'll be back soon. If you've been working to get loose, I'll knock you out with this."

That would, Lucky was sure, freeze the man for a while. It would be a good half hour before he would decide Lucky wasn't coming back, and get up the nerve to start trying to free himself.

Lucky went out the way he'd come in. When he reentered the garage next door, he found the garageman at work refilling his tanks. Lucky waited impatiently, eager to be out of this town. There were too many eyes in it.

When the job was finished, he paid the garageman, carried the refilled tanks out to the street. Hailing a passing taxi, he got in with the tanks, told the driver to take him to the pier. Traffic was heavy going through the center of town. The streets were crowded with the cars of tourists out for a good time. Even so, they made the distance in half the time it had taken the other cab.

Lucky paid the driver and dragged his tanks out of the cab. It drove away as Lucky got the tanks on his shoulders. The dockman's shack was dark, and he was nowhere in sight. Lucky trudged along the pier to the boat with his burden.

"Fan?" he called softly as he climbed down into the cockpit.

There was no answer.

A warning jolt of fear went through him. He put down the tanks.

In the deckhouse, one of the canvas chairs lay over on its side. It hadn't been that way when he'd left. He pushed into the cabin. She wasn't there. She wasn't anywhere on the boat.

Lucky hurried back up onto the pier, covered its length with long strides. He banged his fist on the door of the shack. There was no response from inside. The door was locked.

Lucky hesitated, looking around. He spotted the entrance of a bar on the other side of a dark, empty lot behind the pier. There was always the slim chance that Fan had disobeyed him, decided to wait for him there over a drink. He hurried across the dark lot, went in through the swinging shutter-doors.

The place was small, crowded, full of noise and smoke and the smell of beer. Lucky pushed through the crowd, looking for Fan's red hair. There weren't many women in the place; all the ones who were there were Mexican.

He was turning away from the far end of the bar when the squat dockman entered the place.

They saw each other at the same time. The dockman's dark face convulsed with sudden fear. He swung around and ran out through the swinging doors. Lucky plunged after him, knocking sailors aside with his shoulders like a charging halfback. He reached the doors and shoved through them into the cool sea air outside.

The sudden darkness blinded him. He paused after a few steps, blinking rapidly to help his eyes adjust to the night. There was a blurring of movement in front of him. The dockman? Lucky took a step toward the shadowy figure, his hand going toward his belt.

The shadowy figure spoke. "Don't try anything funny. You're outlined against the light from that door behind you. I'll plug you dead center."

Barney's voice. Moonlight glinted on the gun in his hand.

Lucky's muscles spasmed. He flung himself sideways, out of the light from the bar doorway, snatching the revolver from his belt. He had it in his fist when Barney's gun roared. Lucky felt the slug tear his shirt, just under the armpit. He dropped to one knee, squeezing the trigger of the revolver in his hand at the same time. Its roar blended with Barney's second shot.

Lucky heard Barney's bullet whisper past his ear, saw his own slug kick Barney backward. Lucky fired again. The gun boomed and recoiled against the heel of his hand. Barney was spun around and hurled to the ground in an ungainly heap.

There was the scrape of shoe leather on the ground behind Lucky.

The dockman. He'd forgotten about the dockman.

Lucky lunged to his feet, twisted around trying to bring the revolver to bear. He didn't quite make it. He was struck across the top of the head by something very hard and heavy.

The darkness vanished in a flash of dazzling light that somehow managed to illuminate the whole world without revealing any single object in its light.

Then the light went out and there was blackness more impenetrable than the night. Lucky had a brief sensation of floating upward when he was actually going down. He didn't feel it when his face hit the ground.

12

Pain pulsed against the top of Lucky's skull in time with his heartbeat, trying to force its way out of his head and not succeeding.

For a time, all of his awareness was wrapped around that pulsing pain in his head. Then, gradually, there were other things. The pain did not go away but, localizing at one point on his skull, it ceased to fill his brain entirely. He became conscious that he lay curled up on his side, his ankles tied together and his wrists bound tightly behind his back.

He tried opening his eyes, experimentally. The pain got no worse. He listened to the harsh, labored sound of his breathing and waited as the blurring of his vision cleared.

He lay on the floor of a room that had a raw, new look to it. There was no furniture at all, no curtains or blinds on the windows. The only light came from a small kerosene lamp on the floor across the room.

Trenker sat on the floor in one corner holding a .38 automatic on his thigh, its muzzle aimed in Lucky's direction. Almost with disinterest, Trenker watched Lucky struggle to a sitting position, wincing as fresh jabs of pain hit the top of his bruised skull.

"Glad you decided to come around," Trenker rasped. "I was afraid that Mex hit you too hard. I want you to know about it when I kill you. Like Barney knew it when you killed him."

Lucky said nothing. He leaned back against the wall, taking slow, deep breaths, waiting for the pain to subside.

From his left, Fan said, "Hello, Lucky." Her voice was hushed with defeat and fear. "Welcome back to the living. Temporarily."

Lucky turned his head, carefully. Fan sat against the wall beside him, her wrists and ankles tied like his. Her red hair was a wild tangle and there was a long rip in her blouse. Otherwise she did not look harmed in any way.

"Where . . ." he croaked. He cleared his throat, but his voice remained guttural. "Where are we?"

"A new motel outside of town," Fan told him. "It's not open for business yet. Nobody's here except us. Nobody around to hear . . . anything."

She was making a great effort to control herself. But her voice shook badly.

"What happened?" he asked her. "How'd they get you?"

"That man on the pier came aboard the boat about ten minutes after you left. He said there was something he wanted to show me in his shack. I figured it was just a pass, so I told him to get off the boat. He grabbed me. I still thought it was a pass. Until Barney and Trenker suddenly appeared."

She looked at Lucky, despair making her face haggard. "They tied and gagged me, stuck me in the back of a car. Trenker stayed there with me. Nothing happened for a long time, and then I heard shots. The next thing, that dockman was dragging you into the car. He said you'd killed Barney. Did you?"

"I shot him. I don't know if he's dead."

"He's dead all right," Trenker intoned. "You'd never've done it, except Bruno gave orders he wanted you alive. Barney musta been scared of what Bruno'd do if he killed you. It made him slow on the trigger. So he's dead and you're still alive. But you won't be much longer."

"What are we waiting for?"

"Bruno. He was looking for you down in Ensenada. I called him. You in such a hurry for your own funeral? It'll be soon. Soon's Bruno gets here."

Lucky rested his head against the wall, let his eyes close. He felt limp. All he wanted to do was go back to sleep.

He forced his eyes open. "Trenker, we know where Mort Connors stashed his loot. Why let Bruno have it? You let us go, and you can have it. All of it."

"Me? Pull a deal like that?" Trenker looked contemptuous. "Nobody gets away with double-crossing Bruno." He looked at Fan. "*You're* gonna find that out."

She shuddered and tore her eyes from his.

"Almost half a million bucks those stones are worth to you," Lucky persisted. "Ever think about having that much in your pocket all at once?"

"Save your breath," Trenker snarled.

The door of the motel room opened. The squat dockman hurried in, blurted, "He comes!"

Trenker stood up. There was the sound of a car approaching over gravel and stopping outside. Its door opened, slammed.

A moment later Bruno came in, his bulk crowding the room. His empty eyes went from the dockman to Fan and Lucky, turned on Trenker. "What happened? Where's Barney?"

Trenker told him.

No emotion appeared in Bruno's impassive face. He looked at Fan and Lucky again, briefly, then he turned to the nervous dockman. From his pocket, Bruno brought out a roll of big bills. He peeled some off, slapped them in the dockman's waiting hand.

The dockman stared down at the money, stunned by the actual possession of it. Lucky doubted that he'd ever made that much in a year.

"You get out of town," Bruno told the dockman. "The cops'll be wanting to question anybody that was around where Barney got it. They ain't gonna talk to you. Understand?"

The dockman's head bobbed up and down.

"Got some place else to go?" Bruno demanded.

"*Sí* . . . My sister and her husband. They live in Tijuana. I go there."

"Don't come back for a couple weeks. And keep your mouth shut when you do come back. You weren't here tonight. You don't know nothing about it. If you talk, I'll find out. I'll come after you."

Bruno didn't have to explain what he'd do when he caught up with him. The dockman knew that quite well.

"I go," he assured Bruno nervously. "I stay away. I do not talk. I swear it to you."

"Get going," Bruno snapped.

The dockman hurried out of the room without a backward glance, the money clutched firmly in his fist.

Bruno kicked the door shut after him, turned around and looked down at Lucky and Fan.

"Well . . ." he said.

That was all he said for a time. He just looked at them.

Then he demanded, without preamble, "Where's the stones?"

Nobody answered.

Bruno brought his meaty fists together in front of him, cracked the knuckles of one with the other. "You're gonna tell me," he stated. "This ain't like last time. You don't get away from me this time." He looked at Fan. "Neither one of you. I asked a question. I'm gonna get the answer, and it ain't gonna take all night either."

"I'll tell you what, Bruno," Lucky said. "We'll make a trade with you."

"No trade. No deal. You ain't got anything to trade with. Not no more."

"There's the jewels," Lucky reminded him.

"They ain't yours to trade with," Bruno said flatly. "They're mine. You're gonna take me to 'em. And I'll pay you both for 'em by letting you die the easy way. Fast. No pain."

"Your offer," Lucky told him thinly, "just doesn't sound tempting enough, I'm afraid."

Trenker slipped his gun in his shoulder holster, took his switchblade knife from his pocket. The long, deadly blade snicked out. He took a step toward Lucky.

"Cut it out," Bruno growled at Trenker. "You wanna kill him like you did Connors?"

Trenker looked hurt. "That was an accident, Bruno. You know that. I didn't mean to kill Connors."

"You're not having another accident," Bruno told him. "Not until I got those stones in my hands. Then you can have a couple of accidents. Put it away."

Reluctantly, Trenker closed the knife and dropped it back in his pocket. He glared down at Lucky, his big hands hanging slightly curled at the ends of his long arms. "Let me lean on him a little, anyway," he begged.

Bruno shook his head. "A waste of time." He looked at Lucky. "Ain't it? You're a hardnose. You showed me that. We could take you apart and you still wouldn't spill. Right?"

"We can still make a deal," Lucky told him tensely.

"I don't need a deal." Bruno turned on Fan. "I got *her*."

His hand reached down and seized her red hair, dragged her up off the floor by it. She screamed with the pain in her scalp as he yanked her up on her feet.

"You ain't tough like Lucky there," Bruno growled, pulling her face close to his. "You're soft. You'll squeeze down real small. I'm gonna put you through the wringer till one of you two tells me about Connors's stones."

Still holding her by her hair, he shoved her against the wall. She got a dazed look on her face as he drew back his free hand to begin.

"Hold it!" Lucky snapped. "You can have the gems."

Bruno turned his head, scowled down at him. "Where are they?"

"It's hard to describe. We can take you there. We haven't located the exact spot yet, but we know the general area."

Lucky could think of a number of things that could happen during a further search for those jewels. He'd have a chance to maneuver, something he didn't have at the moment.

Bruno studied him, thinking about it. He seemed to be reading Lucky's mind. Finally he shook his head. "I think you're trying to con me."

He looked back at Fan, whom he still held up by her hair. "I'm more likely to believe it when *you* get around to telling me." He drew back his free hand again.

The motel door swung open violently, slammed back against the wall.

A lean young man with blond hair and a tough, cynical face stepped into the room.

Rudy Marco.

Lucky stared at him, open-mouthed. The last he'd seen of this young grifter, he'd left him tied up in a Los Angeles alley.

Rudy Marco looked the same as he remembered him. The same cheap, over-padded suit, the same cocky grin. But his hands were not tied behind him now. And one of them held a powerful .357 Magnum whose barrel swung lazily back and forth between Bruno and Trenker.

"Quittin' time, friends," Rudy Marco announced. "Night shift coming on."

Bruno let go of Fan. She sagged against the wall, not understanding her reprieve. Trenker reached for the gun in his shoulder holster.

Rudy Marco leveled the Magnum at Trenker's stomach and laughed. It was a soft, crazy kind of laugh.

It froze Trenker's hand in mid-air.

"That's the boy," Rudy Marco told him quietly. "Try that again and you'll be breathing through a hole in your guts. Better do like your boss. He knows when the track's too muddy. You don't see him playing hero."

Bruno's face darkened. "Who the hell're you? What . . ."

Rudy Marco ignored him. To Trenker he said, "That knife you were waving around before. Now's your chance to use it. Cut Lucky and the girl loose."

Trenker didn't move. He seemed to be trying to puzzle it out.

Rudy Marco let Bruno see the dark mouth of the Magnum. "Tell him."

Bruno growled, "Do like he says, Trenker."

Trenker got the knife out, opened it. He started toward Lucky.

"Don't try to be tricky," Rudy Marco warned him. "Unless you'd enjoy having your spine cut in half."

Trenker, his scrambled face furious, crouched and cut the ropes around Lucky's ankles and wrists. The instant his hands were free Lucky reached up and took the gun from Trenker's holster. Then he stood up on numb feet while Trenker cut Fan's ropes. She continued to lean against the wall, still not fully grasping what had happened.

"Over against that wall," Rudy Marco ordered Trenker.

Trenker backed to the wall. Lucky frisked Bruno, took his gun away from him and gave him a shove. "You too."

Bruno backed to the wall beside Trenker. He was over his surprise now. He looked almost bored, all but his eyes.

Rudy Marco glanced at Lucky. "Any unfinished business to attend to here?"

"No. Let's cut out."

"After you."

Lucky took hold of Fan's wrist and drew her toward the door. Rudy Marco stepped aside for them. "The first one of you to come out after us," he informed Bruno and Trenker, "is gonna get a slug in the face." He backed out after Lucky and Fan.

There were two cars outside. A black Cadillac and a tan-and-blue Oldsmobile. Lucky fired a shot into one rear tire of each.

"Good idea," Rudy Marco said. "But we still better get out fast."

He ran, leading them away from the motel toward a grove of trees. In the shadows of the grove was a Buick sedan. "You drive," Rudy Marco snapped. "I'll handle the rear action." He jumped into the back seat as Fan and Lucky slid into the front. Lucky slammed the door shut and had the motor going a split second later.

As he let out the brake, the light inside the motel cabin went out.

"Step on it!" Rudy Marco rasped. "There's a road straight ahead of us. Make a right turn on it."

The Buick shot forward out of the grove of trees, rocketed down a slope. In the back seat, Rudy Marco was peering through the rear window, his Magnum up and ready. But with the lamp in the motel out, it was too dark back there to see anything.

Lucky had just spotted the ribbon of highway ahead when back in the darkness in front of the motel a tommy gun began to chatter in short, spaced bursts. The rear window of the Buick exploded in a shower of glass. Rudy Marco gasped, let go of his gun, and sank down in the back seat.

Lucky spun the wheel and the Buick skidded onto the road. Back behind them, the tommy gun stammered again. Slugs whined off the roof of the car. Lucky jammed the accelerator to the floor and the car roared off up the highway. In seconds they were out of range of the gunfire.

Keeping the Buick at top speed, Lucky yelled, "Marco?"

"My shoulder . . ." Rudy Marco gasped, huddling on the back seat.

"Bad?"

"It ain't good," Rudy Marco grated.

Fan quickly climbed over the top of the front seat, got in back with him. She pulled back his jacket, enlarged the bullet tear in his shirt.

"His shoulder's smashed!" she yelled at Lucky, then went to work trying to stop the flow of blood. Rudy Marco set his teeth against the pain of it.

"This the way back to town?" Lucky called back.

"Yeah," Rudy Marco said through his teeth.

"I'll get you to a doctor."

"Guess you'd better," Rudy Marco admitted weakly. "Christ! And I almost pulled it off."

"You pulled it off just fine, for my money." And then Lucky asked, as much to keep the young grifter's mind off his pain as out of curiosity, "How'd you come to bust in on us like that?"

"I couldn't let 'em kick the whereabouts of that loot out of you, could I? Not if I want my cut. I do get a cut now, don't I? I earned it?"

"You earned it all right," Lucky told him. "You'll get it—out of whatever I get. But how'd you find me?"

Fan had found the way to slow the blood flow from his shoulder to a trickle by digging her thumbs in deep at a certain spot next to it. Rudy Marco let his head fall back limply against the seat cushion. "After you left me in that alley," he muttered, forcing the words out, "I got loose . . . but you were gone . . . I went back and had a talk with that dame I saw you talking to."

"Dolores Brown?"

"Yeah. She likes money. Almost as much as me . . . She told me you were looking for this girl . . . sounded like the redhead the papers said was with Connors. . . . So when this Brown dame told me you'd been . . . interested in Bruno Rangoni . . . I head for Bruno's place. . . . Watched it. . . . I been . . . tailing Bruno ever since."

"For a grifter who likes his dough the easy way," Lucky said, "you're not very smart. Bucking a character like Bruno's doing it the hard way."

"Not so smart yourself . . ." Rudy Marco murmured weakly. "Getting stuck with the rap . . . for a kill you didn't do. . . . I heard 'em say Trenker did it . . . surprised me . . . I figured . . . it was you. . . . But I was still right about the other. . . . You do know where Connors's loot is. So I'm in luck. . . ."

"I'll have to admit one thing," Lucky said. "Whatever you get out of this, you will have earned. I hope for your sake it doesn't add up to a big fat nothing."

There was no answer from the rear.

Lucky slowed the car, glanced back. Rudy Marco had fainted.

There was a doctor who had his office in his home on the east side of town. Lucky pulled to a stop in front of the house. Rudy Marco was still unconscious so he gathered him up in his arms.

"Stay here," he told Fan. "If you spot Bruno or Trenker lean on the horn. And use that Magnum if you have to."

He carried the unconscious grifter to the front door, kicked at it till the doctor opened it. Inside, Lucky stayed in the examination room for a short time, watching the doctor work on the man stretched out on his table. He waited only long enough to assure himself that the doctor knew his business.

"Is he going to be all right?" he asked finally.

The doctor nodded, not looking up. "He is in shock. From the pain. I will inject a sedative before he regains consciousness. But it will be many months before he can use this shoulder again."

Lucky drew from his pocket all the money he had left, put it on the instrument cabinet. "This was in his pocket when I found him like that on the road. I imagine there's enough there to get him whatever he needs."

The doctor looked up for a moment then, glanced at the money, at Lucky. "You are not leaving? The police will have to question you. When I have the chance to call them."

"Of course," Lucky said. "As a matter of fact, I'll go get them myself." He left the room before the doctor could object, strode back out to the car.

"How is he?" Fan asked anxiously as he slid behind the wheel.

"He'll be all right." He started the car.

"We're not just going to leave him? After all he did for us?"

"There's nothing we can do for him. Not now. He's in good hands. I'll make it up to him if I ever get out of this in one piece."

He drove away from the curb, headed for the waterfront.

"Where are we going?"

"Back to the boat," he told her.

Nothing had changed. Now he had two people who could testify he hadn't killed Mort Connors—Fan and Rudy Marco. But Marco's sworn statement of what he'd overheard wouldn't be worth a damn. The law would never believe a grifter like Marco who probably had a bad record a mile long. The testimony of guys like that could be bought and sold for peanuts.

He still had to get those jewels. He needed them as bait to pull the swindle of his life—persuading Bruno to sacrifice Trenker to the law. The time in which he could accomplish it had now been cut drastically short. Bruno knew they'd come in by boat—which brought up another thought.

Lucky glanced at Fan. "Can either Bruno or Trenker handle a boat?"

"Trenker can. Used to be a bos'n or something in the navy, back during the war."

That was it, then. By dawn, Bruno and Trenker would be out in a fast cruiser, combing the waters off the coast for them. He had to move fast.

But not so fast as to forget caution. Lucky parked the car a block from the dock area. The police had no way of knowing there was any connection between the dead Barney and Lucky, so there'd be no reason for them to be watching his boat. And any cops assigned to the killing were probably prowling the gambling joints around town, trying to dig up a money motive.

But Lucky couldn't afford to take chances now. He moved slowly, watchfully, as he led Fan toward the dark lot behind the pier.

Barney's body was gone. So were the police.

Lucky got the Magnum in his fist, approached the pier cautiously, taut-nerved. But his luck was still holding. Bruno and Trenker hadn't shown up yet.

When they did show up, fifteen minutes later, Lucky, Fan and the boat were gone.

13

Lucky's hopes rose with the dawn. The coastal area was shrouded in fog so thick that from their anchorage near the lava-rock islands they could not see the shore. It wasn't just a dawn mist. The sun came up and burned at the fog like a tiny candle flame surrounded by a blurred halo, but the fog did not disperse.

"We're in luck," he told Fan. "They'll never spot us in this soup."

Fan squinted dubiously into the fog around their boat. "Won't it make it harder for you to see under the water?"

"I'm not going under. Not out here." He gazed at the massive jumbles of rock protruding up out of the sea like half-submerged mountains. "Our time's running out. I'm going to play a long shot." He looked at Fan. "Are you sure Mort Connors used those exact words about the gems being in 'a nice safe *hole'?*"

She nodded, frowning at him. "Does it mean something special to you?"

"I know what it *could* mean." He nodded at the islands of lava rock. "He might have been referring to a cave—in one of those. They were heaved up by volcanic action and the bigger ones are probably riddled with open spaces inside."

"But why would Mort have needed diving gear for a cave?"

"The bottom of any sizable cave inside one of those rocks is most likely far below sea level."

Fan hugged herself and shivered. "The idea of diving in some dark, closed space gives me the creeps."

"You won't be doing it," he told her. "I will."

Two of the lava islands were much larger than any of the others. Lucky decided to start on them. He took the boat in as close to one of them as he dared without risking tearing the keel out on the jagged submerged rocks. The sea was turbulent where he anchored and gigantic breakers thundered against the towering mass of black rock. Foam churned around its base and spray rained down on Fan and Lucky. The boat bobbed like a cork, without a pause. Fan had to hang on with both hands to keep from being thrown to the deck.

"I'm not staying on this boat while you explore," Fan told Lucky, raising her voice to be heard over the din of the breakers. "I can feel myself getting seasick again."

Lucky got the waterproof flashlight for himself, gave Fan an ordinary three-battery flash. He went over the side, sinking into the water till it was foaming around his waist before his feet touched solid rock underneath. Reaching up, he helped Fan down from the boat, led her over jagged rocks slippery with eelgrass. They climbed up out of the violent surf among the boulders of the island.

The tortured, twisted rock formations of the island were barren and there was no earth or sand. From the lofty peaks of the island the screech of sea birds reached them through the pounding of the waves against the rock.

Lucky leaned close to Fan and spoke in her ear. "It'll go faster if we both search. You go around to the right there. I'll go left. We'll meet on the other side. If you find what we're looking for, come back for me. It'll be a pretty deep cave, with the bottom hidden by water."

Fan nodded that she understood. They separated and began their search.

In the next few hours, Lucky found a number of promising looking openings in the rock that soon proved disappointments: crevasses that soon petered out, caves with dry bottoms, passages that went straight in for a space, then chimneyed upward. It was noon when he met Fan on the other side of the island. She hadn't found what they were looking for either.

Lucky pointed toward the other of the two largest islands. "We'll try that one next. Let's have some lunch first."

"I'm getting more nervous about Bruno every minute," she confessed.

"You've got reason to be. But this fog still hasn't lifted. That's one break, anyway."

They waded back out to the boat, and Lucky cruised it into calmer water. They made a quick meal of some sandwiches, then Lucky took the boat in near the other large island.

They explored this one the way they had the first, separating and circling it in opposite directions. For several hours Lucky worked his way across the rock formations of the island, testing every possible opening. He was emerging from a tunnel that had petered out after thirty feet, when he saw Fan coming back, climbing over the rocks toward him. He slid down the side of a boulder to meet her.

"I've found something," she told him breathlessly. "A hole in the rock. I went in pretty far before I got the shakes from being inside there all by myself."

"Let's have a look."

Lucky followed as she led the way. On the north slope of the island they worked their way up through a jumble of rocks till they came to an opening under an outthrust ledge. It was a dark hole in the black lava, roughly two feet across and three feet high.

"You first," Fan said. "Maybe I can control my claustrophobia better if I see you in front of me."

Lucky looked seaward. The fog was holding. He couldn't see more than two hundred yards away. Getting down on his hands and knees, he crawled into the hole with Fan close behind him.

The tunnel led straight into the side of the island for a space, then made a bend to the right. None of the daylight from outside reached around the bend. Lucky switched on his flashlight, and its beam stabbed the darkness ahead, showing him a place where the tunnel forked. They crawled to the fork, and he probed both passages with his light. One led upward; the other angled down. Lucky chose the passage leading downward.

The incline was gradual at first, then it steepened. As it led them downward, the tunnel began to twist and turn—and grow smaller. They followed it for about four hundred yards where the incline ended and the tunnel stretched out ahead of them level again. But as they worked through this level length, the tunnel kept narrowing until its roof was touching their backs.

If the tunnel got much smaller, Lucky realized, they'd have to give up and go back. It wouldn't be easy. There was no room to turn around. They'd be forced to retrace their route backward.

But the tunnel grew no smaller. And after a hundred yards or so it suddenly sloped upward. Lucky and Fan climbed up through it for about another fifty yards. They emerged from the mouth of the tunnel to find themselves on the floor of a huge, rough-walled chamber. The place was filled with a dead silence. They couldn't hear the breakers through the rock.

Lucky stood up and flashed his light around. The vaultlike ceiling of the chamber was high above their heads. The floor of the chamber was worn as rough as the sloping walls—except for a large area in the middle. There, the floor had a smooth-polished look, and its rock was a shade blacker than that of the rest of the cavern.

Curious, Lucky advanced a few steps. The beam of his flashlight reflected off the smooth blackness of the floor in the center of the chamber. It wasn't rock there; it was water! The surface of a big underground pond.

Excited, they edged closer, shone their lights into the water. The beams probed below the surface to the bottom about three feet below. They moved along the edge of the water, continuing to probe the pond with their lights. Below the surface, the rock sides were as rough as the walls above and full of jagged outcroppings. But nowhere was an underwater opening revealed. The water seemed merely to fill a big, shallow cup in the floor of the chamber.

"But where does the water come from?" Fan murmured, her voice echoing eerily in the chamber.

Lucky swung his light around the walls. The beam found a hole. It was several feet above the floor, on the opposite side of the chamber from the tunnel through which they'd entered.

"Could drip down from in there," Lucky said. "We'll try it."

They hurried around the pond. The opening in the opposite wall was bigger than the one across the floor from which they'd emerged. Lucky probed it with his flashlight. It was the mouth of a tunnel leading straight into the rock.

Lucky climbed up into it, pulled Fan up after him. They crawled through the horizontal tunnel till they reached a place where it branched in three different directions. Lucky chose the branch farthest to the left for the first try but it quickly narrowed till they were forced to slither forward on their stomachs. Then, abruptly, it ended.

They backed to the main tunnel. There, they sat up on the hard rock floor, taking a breather.

"That wasn't much fun," Fan whispered. There was something about being confined like this, with the sense of all that tremendous weight of rock over and around them, that induced whispering. "I hope there aren't many more like that. I felt like it was all going to settle down and crush me any second."

"Want to go back and wait outside for me?"

She shook her head stubbornly. "I can take it if you can. Complaining just makes it seem better, somehow."

They tried the middle branch next. This one was almost big enough for them to walk through, in a crouch. But after a short distance it suddenly inclined steeply upward. They climbed it, up into the heart of the island. It came to a dead end against the dark lava rock.

They went back down and entered the last branch. This one led downward and abruptly subdivided into a labyrinth of tunnels interlacing each other. Lucky and Fan explored this maze, their hands and knees beginning to get bruised from the hard rock of the passageway floors. After almost two hours of it, Lucky gave up. None of the tunnels led anywhere.

"But that water we saw," Fan said. "It had to come from somewhere."

Lucky nodded. "I'm going to have another look at that pool. With the Scuba gear. If the water doesn't come from above, it's got to come from below."

They were starting back toward the pool chamber when Lucky suddenly stopped, listening.

Fan heard it too. Before there'd been a tomblike silence inside this island of rock. Now there was the faintest sound of lapping, gurgling water. "What is it?"

"The tide's coming in," Lucky told her softly. "I forgot about that. I shouldn't have."

He didn't give voice to the rest of his thought. But for the rest of the way through the labyrinth he moved so fast that Fan could hardly keep up with him.

They reached the short main tunnel leading into the chamber. Lucky quickly crawled its length, came to a halt when he reached its mouth. He stared at what he saw, his fear confirmed. Somewhere in that pool there *was* a passage to the ocean.

The dark pool in the chamber now covered its entire floor and was rising rapidly. It was now only a bare foot below the tunnel in which they crouched. And on the other side of the chamber, the passage through which they'd originally entered the chamber was under two feet of water.

Which meant that most of the tunnel leading to the outside of the island was filled with water. And that tunnel was far too long for anyone to be able to swim through submerged. They were trapped.

He didn't have to explain what had happened to Fan. She saw it. And she saw how fast the water was still rising. "We're going to be *drowned* in here!"

Lucky pushed past her, back inside the tunnel.

"Come on!" he rasped.

She scrambled after him. Where the tunnel divided into three branches, Lucky took the middle one—the one leading upward. They climbed as far as it went. At the top where it ended against the rock, it leveled off a bit. Enough for them to turn around and brace themselves in a sitting position, staring downward.

Fan pressed tightly against Lucky, trembling. "Will it . . . will the water . . . come up this far?" she whispered.

"We'll soon know."

The sound of the water below them got louder, echoing up the confines of the tunnel to them. Lucky flashed his light downward. Held it that way. Time dragged horribly. The sound of the water increased, seeming to fill the tunnel and press against their eardrums.

Then they saw it, coming up into the tunnel below them. It was like black oil, bubbling and foaming as it was forced upward through the confining funnel of unyielding rock.

Fan made a thin whining sound and convulsively buried her face against Lucky's chest, hiding her eyes. He put his arm around her shaking body, holding her close as he watched the distance between them and the dark water grow shorter by the second.

14

A full minute passed before Lucky realized that the water was no longer rising.

Its black surface was only six or seven inches below their feet, but there it stayed, as still and solid as the rock confining it.

Lucky drew in a slow, ragged breath, shook Fan gently. "It's stopped."

Slowly, she raised her face from his chest and forced herself to turn her head enough to look down. She stared at the water. Several times her mouth opened and her lips moved, but no sound came out. As though hypnotized, she continued to stare at the water below their feet.

Finally a whisper came out of her, "How long? Before it goes down?"

"A long time. Till ebb tide."

Her horror-stricken eyes turned to him. "But the air in here . . . is there enough to . . ."

"Don't talk any more," he told her softly. "It uses the air up faster. Just breathe slow and easy. All we can do is wait."

They waited.

With infinite deliberation, seconds grouped themselves into a full minute. Then they set about constructing another minute. Drops of water could have worn away a rock faster than the minutes nibbled away at a single hour.

The water was a malignant, malicious presence. It imprisoned them and watched them, not budging.

They waited.

The flashlights began to dim. Lucky turned them off. They waited in total darkness, feeling the water and rock pressing in on them.

Their precious pocket of air began to go bad as they used up the oxygen in it. Its poisonous effect entered their lungs, seeped into their bloodstreams. Lucky felt his strength dissolving and his brain going groggy.

Fan's head drooped on his shoulder, became leaden in its weight. He held her and tried not to think about what the fresh, windy air must be like at that moment outside the sealed-off cell nature had formed around them.

His skin became clammy with drops of perspiration. His mind began to wander, floating through fragments of old forgotten dreams and nightmares. His hands and feet seemed too far away from him. He tried moving his right foot, wondering if he could do it. The foot moved, but it still seemed a long way off.

With a numb finger, he snicked on one of the flashlights. The beam lanced down through a haze. Everything looked misty. But the water was still there. It hadn't moved. He switched off the light.

They waited.

Fan's weight lolled against him. He thought he'd better hold her more tightly but his arm didn't respond. It just lay there. All of him felt like that now. Limp. Like a bag of soft putty. His lungs worked like bellows. He gasped in air through his open mouth, but the air did not revive him. It did the opposite.

His brain lost the last thread of semicoherent thought. It filled with moving shadows, aimless sounds, drifting lights. All inside his head. Their tomb contained them and a silence that had weight and body to it.

He lost consciousness. . . .

There was a dream of falling. His eyes snapped open and stared at utter blackness. He had not fallen. He was still there, cramped against the rock wall, Fan's limp figure against him in the circle of his arm. He drew a deep breath and wondered why he'd dreamed of falling. The falling dreams were part of his childhood. They didn't happen any more.

He squeezed Fan's arm and wondered if they were going to die here, like this. Somebody would find the boat eventually. But would they search in here for whoever belonged to the boat? He doubted it. Maybe someday someone would explore these passages again. By then all there'd be left to find would be two skeletons.

He sighed and drew a deep breath.

And realized he was doing it.

His head came up. His numbed fingers fumbled at the flashlight switch. The light beam snapped on, blinding him for a moment.

The water was gone.

The tunnel walls were damp where it had been, that was all. As far down as the light beam reached, there was no water.

And he was breathing. Breathing air that cleared his brain like a cool wind each time his lungs filled. That meant that all the passages were open—all the way to the outside.

Choking down a laugh of hysterical relief, Lucky shook Fan. Her head rolled on his shoulder; she did not respond. He touched his fingertips to her throat. The pulse beat there. Wrapping both arms around her, he dragged her with him as he slid down the tunnel.

When they reached the leveling-off place, he put down the flashlights, leaving one on. He seized Fan's arms, began pumping them up and down, forcing air in and out of her lungs.

Her eyes opened sleepily. She stared up at him in the light of the flash.

"Tide's out!" he almost shouted at her. "We can get through."

She sat up slowly, looked around her in a puzzled fashion. Gradually she remembered. Dry sobs wracked her. Lucky squeezed her face between his hands, his eyes burning into hers. "Stop it! We can get out now. It's all right."

She got control of herself. "God! I thought sure I was dead!"

"Can you move?"

Her head jerked in a nod. He gave her one of the flashlights, picked up the other. "Don't turn yours on yet. We'll need it if this one goes out before we're clear of here."

He began crawling away through the tunnel. When he glanced back, she was following him on her hands and knees.

They climbed down into the vaulted pool chamber. The pool was low and small-sized once more. As they skirted it Fan looked at its evil black surface and shuddered, then looked quickly away.

They climbed down into the hole on the other side of the chamber, began working their way through the exit tunnel. The walls still dripped moisture, and in places there were puddles of water, but not enough to bar their way. When they finally emerged, they just stood there in the open for a few minutes, doing nothing but breathing the sweet, cool, ocean-scented air. It restored them with amazing speed, washing out of them the last vestiges of their ordeal. It made what had happened unreal, hard to believe.

It was night. The rising water had locked them inside there through all the late afternoon and evening. The fog was gone. The moonlight bathed the sea and the land with a beautiful sheen.

Lucky lighted their way down through the rocks with the flashlight. But as soon as they were in the water, wading out to the surf-tossed boat, he switched the flash off. There was plenty of moonlight to see by on the water. The boat was outlined clearly. Too clearly. With the fog gone and the moon this bright, the danger of being spotted was back with them.

Out on the ocean a sleek, swift, thirty-eight-foot sports cruiser knifed through the water along the coast with its running lights off. Up on the flying bridge Bruno stood with his feet planted far apart and his hands clutching the rail in an effort to keep his balance against the gentle pitch and roll of the boat.

He peered through the moonlit night at the darkly looming islands between the boat and the shoreline. "Did you see that?"

Beside him, handling the wheel, Trenker nodded. "Yeah. Looked like a light moving around in there somewhere. But I don't see it now."

"Let's go in and have a look," Bruno ordered. "Try to keep that lousy motor from making so much noise."

Trenker spoked the wheel. The sharp bow swung shoreward. He throttled down until the engines were barely turning over enough to keep the boat moving forward.

The boat quietly drifted in toward the offshore islands.

"I'm getting seasick again," Fan muttered as Lucky came out of the cabin wearing the rubber exposure suit and Scuba gear. She clung to the deckhouse overhang to keep from being thrown off her feet by the violent motion of the boat in the thundering surf smashing around the island.

"Get back on the island then," Lucky told her. "I'll be with you in a minute."

"Glad to." Fan slipped over the side, waded ashore. Lucky put fresh batteries in the underwater flashlight, picked up the .357 Magnum. Clumsy with the weight of the lead-filled canvas belt and the aqualung tanks on his back, he hauled himself over the gunwale, went down into the surf. He held the gun high out of the water as he waded ashore on his flipper-clad feet.

Fan was waiting for him among the boulders at the island's base. "I think you're crazy going back in there at night."

"Makes no difference once I'm inside. I'd have to use the flash anyway."

"But if that water rises inside again . . ."

"It won't. Not for hours. Besides, I'll have the Scuba gear on anyway. Remember?"

"It's the idea of going back in there after what we went through that turns me to jelly. I wouldn't go back in for anything!"

"Not even for Mort Connors's jewels?"

"Well . . . I'm glad I have you to do it for me."

He grinned at her. She was like an incorrigible child.

"I hope it is in there," she added. "My nerves can't take much more of this."

"Larceny usually is a nervous trade," he said. "Here." He gave her the Magnum. "This is just in case. With this moonlight, we could be spotted almost as easily as in bright daylight. You keep a sharp watch. If anybody comes that you have to shoot,

shoot for the body. . . . I'd better show you how to use it."

He taught her how to hold the gun with both hands for steady aim; how to squeeze the trigger instead of pulling it. As with helmsmanship, she was a quick pupil.

"Good luck," she whispered as he got down on his knees in front of the entrance hole.

"You too." He crawled inside the tunnel.

It was more difficult getting through this time, wearing the tanks on his back. In places he had to slither forward stretched out face-down, but he finally managed to squeeze through the entire route and climbed to his feet inside the pool chamber.

He pointed the flashlight at the pool, trudged to it. As before, he could see no opening below its surface, but this time he knew that there was one. Adjusting the face mask in place, he bit on the mouthpiece and turned on the air valve, then lowered himself into the water.

The beam of his flashlight found the opening almost immediately. It was under a ledge of rock that jutted out from the side, hiding it from anybody looking down from above. It was a long gash of a hole, just wide enough for him to squeeze through. Once through the opening, the hole turned sharply downward, and he pulled himself down through it.

After about ten feet, the space in which he had to move became roomier. He found himself in a large, irregular tunnel. As its walls grew farther apart, Lucky ceased propelling himself with his hands. He drove himself slowly downward through it with a steady, gentle flutter-kick, exploring the way ahead with his flashlight beam.

His ears began to ache with the pressure. He checked his descent, floated weightlessly where he was until he'd had time to adjust to the depth, then swam downward again. The darkness of the water became solid as the tunnel widened so that the flashlight beam no longer reflected off its walls. The beam soon showed nothing more than three inches in front of it. Lucky swam closer to the wall on his left. With the beam bouncing off its rock, the visibility became a little better.

He came suddenly up against what seemed the end of the tunnel. Groping against the rock walls, he found that it made a sharp bend there. He worked his way around the bend, found himself faced with a choice of two openings: one directly ahead and one below him.

He chose the lower one. The tunnel became narrower than it had been before, then widened again and abruptly branched into four separate tunnels. Lucky held himself in place, considering this. If he got lost down in here . . .

He'd just have to be careful, keep recording his route in his head so that he *wouldn't* get lost. Choosing one of the branch tunnels at random, he swam into it.

It went straight down for a bit, then began twisting around like a pretzel. The pretzel straightened itself out, and then forked. Lucky chose the right fork. It took him to a boulderlike outcropping. He worked his way around the boulder, and again found himself with a choice of openings. Once more he chose the opening farthest to the right.

This tunnel seemed to turn in on itself after a short distance. Lucky had the feeling he was swimming in circles. And when again he found himself with a choice of tunnels, he checked his progress and did some grim thinking.

The whole inside of this mountain of lava rock was obviously honeycombed below sea level. And just as obviously there must be a simpler, more straightforward route down to whatever was at the bottom.

He decided to go back up and search for it. If he wandered around in this maze much longer, he was certain to lose all sense of direction. Turning around, he began fluttering his way upward.

Ten minutes later, when he was ascending a vertical tunnel that he thought led up into the chamber pool, he stopped himself just in time to prevent his head from crashing against solid rock above him. The tunnel came to a dead end there.

He was lost.

15

For the dozenth time, Fan glanced anxiously at the opening into which Lucky had vanished. He'd been in there too long. Far too long. Something must have happened to him.

She stared at the entrance to the cave, her anxiety warring with her fear of the place. She decided to give him another five minutes.

She waited out the time with increasing nervousness. When the five minutes were up, she was still alone. She took one last look around her at the night-shadowed ocean and, seeing nothing, lowered herself and started into the cave.

Even with her flashlight illuminating the way, the darkness inside the tunnel, and its feeling of confinement, squeezed her with remembered terror. But she forced herself to keep going, and at last she was getting to her feet inside the pool chamber.

She swung the flashlight around. He wasn't here, nor was there anything in sight to suggest that he had ever been here. She walked to the edge of the black pool, shone the light down into it. There was nothing in it but water and the irregular rock of the cup that held the water.

He'd gone down in there. And he hadn't come up.

She tried to tell herself that her fears were groundless. It was crazy, her worrying about him like this. When he was safe, all she thought about was how she was going to manage to worm those gems away from him, get them all for herself. Yet at a time like this they seemed unreal; only his coming back to her safely mattered.

He still had an adequate air supply; it couldn't have been used up yet. And it was no different, his diving down there, than it had been when he was diving out in the open. She told herself this, but couldn't feel it. The thought of him under all that rock formed a knot of ice inside her.

Finally she forced herself to turn away from the pool. She wasn't helping him by standing here. And she couldn't go down after him. All she could do was stand guard outside, the way he'd instructed her, and wait.

She made herself return to the entrance tunnel, climb down into it. Holding the gun in one hand and the lighted flash in the other, she crawled back through the tunnel.

The first thing she saw when she stood up outside was the dark shape of the other boat anchored alongside theirs.

She froze, staring at it, the meaning of it striking terror through her. Then a shadow moved among the boulders in front of her. The shadow came out into the moonlight, became Trenker—with a gun in his hand.

She didn't think. She just dropped the flash, raised the Magnum in both hands and squeezed the trigger the way Lucky had taught her. The gun roared, almost jumping out of her hands.

The heavy slug smashed into Trenker's chest and kicked him backward. He fell between the boulders. His head tipped back into the foaming surf, his face under water. He did not lift it out.

She didn't hear Bruno behind her. Suddenly his massive arms were around her, squeezing the breath out of her. She tried to struggle, found herself powerless in his embrace, her arms pinned to her sides. He reached down and twisted the Magnum out of her hand.

"Where is he?" Bruno whispered in her ear.

She didn't answer; couldn't answer for the vise of terror that held her heart.

He lifted her off her feet and swung her around till they were both facing the opening to the cave from which she'd emerged.

"In there? . . . Yeah, he must be in there."

Bruno began dragging her backward. . . .

Lucky fought down panic as he realized he was trapped under the rock. He forced himself to continue breathing slowly and regularly through the mouthpiece clamped between his teeth. The air supply in his tanks had to be carefully conserved now. It had to last till he found his way up to the surface.

Turning around in the dead end of the drowned tunnel, he swam downward, trying to retrace his route, searching for some remembered formation in this underwater labyrinth. It was as though all the escape tunnels had sealed themselves behind him. Each time he tried one that led upward, he came to another dead end or the passage would turn in on itself and lead him deeper into the maze.

It became harder to control the impulse to swim faster in an effort to find his way out. Only a continuous effort of will power enabled him to continue flutter-kicking his way slowly through the passages, studying the walls and openings in an attempt to find something he recognized. All sense of direction was gone and it was becoming difficult to determine whether he was swimming up or down.

Suddenly he found himself in a huge vertical shaft. Because he was certain he hadn't been in there before, he started to swim back out. Then he halted, feeling something. The water was tugging at him, trying to pull him downward like an undertow.

He'd felt nothing like that before in this labyrinth. A jolt of hope went through him. The undertow, faint as it was, could only mean one thing. This shaft led down to an opening into the ocean. If he couldn't find his way back to the chamber pool, maybe he could follow this current and come out under the open sea.

He began swimming with the undertow, following its pull. The shaft plunged straight down. He stayed with it, swimming faster now. There wasn't much air left in the tanks on his back. He had to get out before the last of it was gone.

The shaft did an elbow turn. Abruptly, its walls vanished. Puzzled, Lucky checked his progress, swung the flashlight around. There were no shaft walls on either side of him; no rock above or below him. As far as the flashlight beam reached, there was only dark water.

He realized what had happened. The shaft had ended. He was in a mammoth water-filled cavern. Swimming to his right, he searched for the side of the cavern. For two minutes he swam, and still there was only more dark water ahead of him. He gave it up, as he realized that he had lost the tug of the undertow. That was the important thing, to stay with that undertow, follow it out to the ocean. He circled, searching for it again. It was gone.

This cavern was so big that he could wander around in it till his air gave out without finding the current again. Maybe if he could reach the floor of the cavern, then look up and watch his bubbles, he could determine where the underwater pull led to.

Lucky kicked his way straight down. For a long time there was nothing below him but more dark water. Then he saw it: the floor of the cavern, strewn with stones and rock rubble. With a swinging stroke of one hand, he made a turn in the water and came to rest on the bottom.

He turned to watch his air bubbles. As he did so, the beam of his flashlight swung across something that didn't look natural. He turned the beam back to it. Rising from the cavern floor was a large mound of rocks and stones.

Lucky always played his hunches. He had one now. Keeping to the cavern floor, he treaded his way to the mound, began pulling away the chunks of rock.

Under the mound, jammed in a crevice, was a pound tobacco can.

He pulled it loose from the crevice, pried the airtight lid open.

The inside of the can was packed with cut gems—diamonds, emeralds, rubies. . . .

He had found Mort Connors's loot!

Despite the danger of his situation, excitement charged him. He pressed the lid back in place, sealing the can. Now if he could only get out with it . . . He pointed the flashlight upward and blew into his mouthpiece, sending a heavy stream of bubbles up through the water.

The bubbles floated straight up for a few feet, then wavered to the left. With the tobacco can in one hand and the flash in his other, Lucky rose off the floor and kicked his way to the left.

A few minutes later he'd found one side of the cavern—and an opening in it. With his face directly in front of the dark hole in the cavern side, Lucky blew more bubbles. They didn't float upward; instead, they streamed into the opening.

Lucky stared at it unhappily. The opening undoubtedly led out under the ocean. But unfortunately it wasn't big enough for him to get through, not with those tanks on his back.

He wasted no time mourning this fact. He had found the gems down here. That meant that Mort Connors must have had some simple route he'd used getting down and back up. The big vertical shaft might be that route.

Lucky swam across the cavern, re-entered the shaft. It led straight up. He went with it, ignoring all the side passages he passed, pausing from time to time just long enough to adjust to the changing depth pressures. He was increasingly aware of how little air was left in his tanks. If he was wrong about this shaft, if it did not lead him out, there'd be no time for further exploration.

The rise of the shaft came to an end. There, it bent and narrowed into a horizontal tunnel. Lucky swam into the tunnel and followed its twisting length. It got smaller, then opened into a larger tunnel that sloped upward.

Emerging into the larger tunnel, Lucky looked back, saw two openings behind him. One was above the other. The one he'd come out of was the upper one. He had the feeling that he'd gone into the lower one when he'd first come down into this labyrinth, and gotten lost. If he was right, he was now in the tunnel that led directly up into the chamber pool.

Lucky followed the tunnel's upward slant. At some points along it, he was certain he'd been in it before, but at others he knew he might be wrong. He'd worked his way through too many passages trying to get out of the water-filled maze; they'd all begun to look alike to him.

Then the tunnel opened out under a ledge of rock.

Lucky slid under the ledge. A second later he was standing up in the vaulted chamber, chest deep in the pool, his shoulders and head out of water.

He ripped off the face mask, breathed air through his nose once more. The sense of relief was so strong that he had to smother the hysterical laughter that rose in his throat, choking him.

He waded out of the pool, quickly shrugged off the weight of the tanks, pulled off his flippers. Then he sat down on the dry floor of the chamber, his back against the wall, and rested.

When his nerves and breathing were back to normal, he stood up and, with the tobacco can and flashlight, started for the exit passage. Later he could come back for the Scuba gear. Right now he needed to get out in the open in a hurry.

He crawled through the tunnel. As he neared the outside opening, a thought came to him, making him pause.

He liked Fan. She was a fine girl, in all ways but one. But that one was about to crop up. He knew quite well that he would be crazy to trust her in a situation in which he held a fortune in his hands and she held a gun in hers.

It would be more sensible to go out there empty-handed, and get the gun back from her before he broke the news to her that he'd found Connors's loot.

Setting the tobacco can down against the tunnel wall, he crawled the rest of the way to the opening. He pulled himself out into the star-filled night, stood up among the rocks.

"Fan?" he called softly.

There was no answer.

Puzzled, Lucky glanced toward where their boat bobbed and rolled in the turbulent surf—and saw the other boat tossing beside it.

The meaning of it hit him like a body blow, in the same instant that Fan's warning scream ripped through the dark air. "Lucky!"

He saw her then, by moonlight, in the open deckhouse of their boat. Bruno was behind her, holding her and pressing his back against the deckhouse bulkhead to keep himself from being thrown around by the wild motion of the boat. His left arm was around Fan, pinning her arms to her sides and her back against his massive chest. In his right hand he held a gun against the side of Fan's head.

"Lucky!" Bruno yelled. "Come here! Do it with no tricks, or I'll blow her head off!"

Numbly, Lucky gazed across the churning surf at them, knowing that Bruno had him. Bruno meant exactly what he said. He'd put a bullet through Fan's brain and then start shooting at Lucky. And Lucky had no weapon.

"I ain't playing no games with you!" Bruno yelled. "One more second and I shoot her!"

Lucky started down into the water. His foot struck something heavy and yielding, almost tripping him.

He pointed the flash downward, saw the body of Trenker lying half in the surf.

"Toss that flashlight away!" Bruno shouted at him. "Come on this boat with your hands up and empty!"

Lucky dropped the flashlight, stepped over Trenker and waded out to the boat. As he climbed up across the rocking boat's gunwale, Bruno took the gun from Fan's head and pointed it at him.

Fan instantly turned her face and sank her teeth into Bruno's gun hand.

She bit down with all the strength of her jaw muscles, grinding her sharp teeth into the thick flesh of his thumb joint. Bruno gasped with pain as she tasted his blood in her mouth. He shoved her away with his free hand, ripped his gun hand from the grip of her teeth. The painful effort got his hand free, but it cost him his weapon. The gun spun out of his bleeding hand, flashed over the side, and plunked into the ocean.

With a vicious curse, Bruno slugged Fan in the ear with his fist, sprawling her unconscious in the doorway between the deckhouse and the main cabin. Bruno shoved himself away from the bulkhead and swung to face Lucky, who was charging across the cockpit at him.

Lucky swung at him with all his strength. Bruno tried to dodge the blow, but the rolling of the boat threw him off balance and Lucky's fist hammered flush against the bridge of his nose, breaking it. Bruno staggered back a step, caught his balance and drove a huge fist at Lucky's heart. Lucky side-stepped and Bruno's fist skidded off his chest, its impact cushioned by the thick rubber of Lucky's exposure suit. It hurt, but not enough to drop Lucky.

Bruno set himself for another punch, was thrown to one side as the boat pitched in the wild surf. He stumbled across the deckhouse, grabbed a handhold to keep himself from falling. Lucky lunged after him as Bruno let go of his handhold and twisted around to meet his charge.

The last time they had fought, Lucky hadn't stood a chance. Bruno was too strong for him, and had that astounding speed and agility. But this fight was different.

Bruno was no sailor and Lucky was. And the boat under them was rolling and pitching continuously in the heavy surf thundering around the base of the rocky island.

Lucky was able to keep his balance on the heaving deck without thinking about it—it was instinctive with him—and he gave all of his attention and strength to chopping away at Bruno.

Bruno's swift agility was lost as he had to battle both Lucky and the motion of the boat. He was forced to keep catching his balance, was unable to dodge quickly or set himself long enough to drive in a punch exactly where he wanted it. When he came after Lucky, he had to do it slowly, cautiously, concentrating mostly on staying on his feet. Lucky moved around him easily, swiftly, striking him at will, dodging away from Bruno's answering fists.

Each time Bruno stumbled and fought to regain his balance, Lucky slipped in close and slammed a fist in with everything he had. Bruno only managed to get in a few solid body blows, and some of their force was absorbed by Lucky's rubber exposure suit.

Lucky kept at it, moving in close to drive a fist into Bruno's middle or slash the stiff edge of his hand against Bruno's neck—chopping Bruno down a peg each time, and slipping away quickly from Bruno's floundering counterattack.

Bit by bit, the terrible beating Bruno was taking began to weaken him. His own punches, even when they landed right, lacked their former crushing power.

Lucky, realizing this, got in close and braced his feet apart, planting himself there and slugging Bruno with one punch after another. Bruno spat blood and stumbled backward. Lucky went after him, driving a left into Bruno's guts, ripping a right to his eye. The blows sapped Bruno and he began to totter.

Lucky, eager to end it all, made the mistake of getting too close. With sudden desperation, Bruno threw himself bodily at Lucky, spreading his arms out wide. Before Lucky could dodge away, Bruno's weight hit him, his huge arms closing around Lucky and crushing the breath from him.

Lucky fought to get free and couldn't. Bruno's arms continued to tighten and Lucky felt his ribs bending as they fell against the gunwale. He got one foot up against the rail, shoved backward with all his strength. Bruno pitted all his weight and failing strength against this push. That was what Lucky was waiting for. He abruptly reversed himself and yanked forward.

Bruno, off balance, went forward with him. Still locked together by Bruno's arms, they fell across the gunwale, toppled over the side, and sank into the water.

Lucky, expecting it, sucked his lungs full of air the instant before they went under. Bruno, caught unprepared, found himself gulping in sea water. He thrashed to the surface, coughing, his eyes tormented by the stinging, salty Pacific. Unprepared to battle the churning sea, Bruno floundered helplessly as wave after wave tossed him about.

Suddenly the boat was lifted high on the crest of a swell and, just as suddenly, was plummeted down with frightening force. Lucky managed to thrust himself away from the side of the boat, but Bruno was smashed brutally against it, then disappeared below the blue waters.

Lucky, gasping for air, desperately scanned the area for sight of the man as he swam toward the anchor chain. And then he saw him, about one hundred yards from the boat, floating face down in the red-foaming surf, his huge limp body being borne away by the surge of the Pacific.

Wearily, Lucky hauled himself up into the cockpit. He staggered into the deckhouse and switched on the boat's lights. Fan lay where she'd fallen, not moving. He picked her up and carried her to the deckhouse bunk.

Her eyes were closed, there was a dark bruise on the side of her face, but she was breathing. Lucky crouched beside her, began massaging her temples and throat with a cloth he'd soaked in water.

Finally she began to stir. An unintelligible moaning sound came from her parted lips and her eyes fluttered open. She stared up at him blankly. Then fright seized her and she tried to sit up.

He held her down gently. "It's all over," he told her softly. "You're safe."

"Bruno?"

"Drowned." And then, to snap her out of it, he started to break the news to her, "I found . . ."

A voice from off to starboard hailed their boat in Spanish.

Lucky stood up quickly, turning to look. A boat had swung around the side of the island, was closing in on them with its big spotlight stabbing across the water ahead of it. Lucky saw the uniforms of the men on the bow. It was a Mexican police launch.

Then the police launch swung in alongside their boat, and Lucky saw the lean, tough-faced young guy huddled in the seat beside the helmsman, looking pale and sick, and with his arm in a sling.

Rudy Marco.

16

A week later the four of them sat in chairs around the front of the big desk in the insurance company's office—Lucky and Fan, Andamo and Rovac.

In the swivel chair behind the desk sat the insurance company's ace investigator.

Rudy Marco.

His arm was still in the sling, but otherwise he looked his old, infuriatingly cocky self. And he had the look of a man who has done his job well, and earned the gratitude of his employers. His employers, the company that had insured the jewels stolen by Mort Connors, had reason to be grateful. They had them back.

Rudy Marco had been after the jewels for a long time. For most of that time, all he'd been able to do about it was wait. Like Bruno, he had suspected from the start that Mort Connors had pulled the Wertham Jewelry Company job. But Connors was in prison.

As Rudy Marco had explained to Lucky, he'd started tailing Mort Connors from the moment he got out of prison. He'd seen Fan Ferguson pick Connors up in a bar, and wondered who she was. He'd tailed the two of them to a Los Angeles motel. After checking in, Fan and Connors had gone for a swim in the motel pool. Marco had slipped into their room and gone through Fan's pocketbook.

In it he found a newspaper clipping with a picture of Fan and a short caption about her winning a beauty contest in Detroit. Marco had restored the clipping to her pocketbook and left the room.

He went on tailing Fan and Connors. But Connors, though he didn't spot Marco, fully expected someone to be following him. So he and Fan drove in a rented car onto one of the big thruways at rush hour—and lost Rudy Marco in the crush of speeding traffic.

Marco hadn't been able to locate either of them again. So he decided to try finding Connors by finding Fan. He'd contacted the insurance company's Detroit office. The investigators there, starting with the beauty contest Fan had won, got a lead on her. They found out she'd moved to Los Angeles, and got the first address she lived at there.

Starting with that address, Marco had followed Fan's career in Los Angeles. But it came to a dead end with the boarding house run by the woman named Molly. Fan had moved out of the boarding house without saying where she was going, or telling anybody about her new job in the Strip club. Marco's efforts to locate where Fan had moved to failed, because he didn't know that she had changed her name to Kent.

He was stymied. And then Mort Connors was found dead in a hotel room, and the clerk's description of the woman who had been with him fitted Fan. But Marco still couldn't find Fan.

Then a promise made a week before to Molly at the boarding house—a promise of money if she turned up anything at all concerning Fan—paid off. Lucky came to the boarding house looking for Fan. Molly sent Lucky off on the trail of the places where Fan had lived previously, and tipped off Rudy Marco.

Marco, knowing all the places Fan had lived before, had no trouble finding Lucky and tailing him—in hopes that Lucky could lead him either to Fan or the jewels.

"As it turned out," Rudy Marco had said to Lucky, with that mocking grin of his, "you led me to both. I'm the one that ought to be called 'Lucky.' "

"We're both in luck," Lucky had told him. "You got me off the hook."

Fan hadn't even had to admit any knowledge of how Mort Connors had died. Rudy Marco's testimony proved sufficient. With the highly respected chief investigator of a solid insurance company swearing that he had overheard Bruno and Trenker admit that Trenker had killed Connors by accident, the law decided it would be best to drop the charge against Lucky.

And the fact that he was innocent meant that Andamo had not helped a murderer to escape. The Commissioner didn't like it, but he had to admit that Lucky's escape had resulted in their learning the truth about Connors's death, and finding the long-missing loot. Andamo had been let out of his cell.

"It wasn't so bad, " Andamo had told Lucky lightly. "I knew you were going to show up and get me out sooner or later. And they've improved their jailhouse food a lot since the last time I was in."

Now they sat in Rudy Marco's office and listened to him telling them how pleased his company was with all of them.

"I'd like," Lucky told him pointedly, "to *see* just how pleased your bosses are."

Rudy Marco laughed. "I kinda thought you would. Unfortunately, the company reasons that since *I* had a lot to do with getting the jewels back, you are only entitled to *half* the reward."

"You? *I* found those gems. Myself."

"I'm not talking about finding them. I'm talking about turning them in to the company. My boss has this strange idea that if I hadn't been there, you might not have turned them in." Rudy Marco grinned. "Suspicious, ain't he?"

"So you get half of the reward?"

Rudy Marco sighed. "I should live so long. It's against company policy. Employees like me work for their wages—and that's all they get."

"Now I understand why insurance companies are so rich," Lucky said. "Well, where's my half?"

Rudy Marco opened the center drawer of his desk. "Right here. I got them to cash the check. Figured you'd like it in real money." He took out a stack of bills, pushed them across the desk.

Lucky picked them up. They were thousand-dollar bills. Fifteen of them.

"Like?"

"Very much," Lucky admitted, and stuffed the money in his pocket.

Fan's eyes went to that pocket, then to Lucky's profile. Her gaze was coolly thoughtful, calculating.

"Well," Lucky said. "That about wraps it up."

"Uh-huh." Rudy Marco hesitated, looking embarrassed. "Say, there is one other thing. Personal matter. I hate to ask it, but . . . Well, my wife and I don't get to go out much. I'm always working on some case and . . . Well, naturally she gets feeling cooped up. She was saying the other day that since you're a friend of mine, and she's heard all about that floating supper club of yours . . . Well, I told her I don't make enough to afford the tab in a joint like yours, but she . . ."

Lucky grinned at him. "Any time. On the house. You and your wife just come on out and be my guests for the evening."

Rudy Marco looked relieved. They shook hands at the door.

As they got out of the elevator in the lobby below, Rovac turned to Lucky. "I got to be on duty in half an hour. I'll see you one of these days."

"Why not come out to the *Fortuna* after you get off duty?" Lucky suggested. "We can drown all the unpleasantness with some of that brandy you like so much."

Rovac shook his head. "Not tonight. I need a rest from you. Being a friend of yours is a very wearing thing sometimes."

Lucky smiled. "All right. Make it any night after you stop feeling so nervous."

"Sure. And do me a favor, will you, Lucky? Try to keep out of trouble for a while? Just *try*. Like I said, I need a rest."

Lucky, promising to try, watched Lieutenant Rovac stalk away.

Then he turned to Andamo. "We'd better be getting back out to the boat, start getting it ready for tonight's business."

Fan cleared her throat. "That reward for the gems," she reminded him. "Don't I get any of it?"

Lucky looked at her, thinking it over. Finally he took the money from his pocket. "Too much would be bad for you," he told her calmly. "You'd stay in this town, and this town is bad for you. You admitted that yourself." He peeled a single thousand-dollar bill off the fifteen. "Here. This should be enough to get you back to Detroit and start you off again on the strait and narrow."

She took the bill without complaint. Lucky stuck the other fourteen thousand back in his pocket. Fan's eyes went where the money went, then rose to meet his.

"You've been inviting everybody else to come out to your boat," she said. "How about me?"

"You'll be on your way back to Detroit, remember?"

"I mean before I leave. Like right now?"

"We're going to be busy till the early hours of the morning. Business. A lot of it, I hope."

"I can wait till after business hours," she said softly. And then, even more softly, "We should celebrate, you and I. Shouldn't we?"

Andamo looked unhappy. "I sure hate to say such a thing to a dish as lovely as yourself," he told her. "But you ain't been nothing but bad luck for me and Lucky ever since the first time we met you."

Fan smiled at Andamo. "Don't worry so. It's just for tonight. You'll never see me again." She looked at Lucky questioningly. "How about it?"

Lucky listened to the promise in her voice. "Okay. Come along."

They took a cab out to the dock and rode out to the *Fortuna* in the launch. Lucky took Fan to his spacious cabin, which also served as his office and looked more like a plush den.

From the deep drawer of his desk, Lucky took out a metal box and unlocked it. He took the fourteen thousand-dollar bills from his pocket.

Fan watched him put the money in the box, turn his back on her, lock the box, and put it back in the desk drawer. When he faced her again, he was smiling pleasantly.

"Make yourself at home." He gestured at the neat little bar in one corner of the cabin. "Help yourself."

Fan touched her fingers to his face, caressing them lightly down his cheek. "Don't get too tired, taking care of all the customers. Remember, I'll be waiting here for you."

"Sure." He took her face between his hands, bent and kissed her. It was a long, all-out kiss.

When he let her go, she was looking dreamy-eyed. "You do that again, and I won't let you get to your customers."

"That was just a good-by gesture."

She frowned a bit. "Good-by?"

"Uh-huh. Till I get back." He left her, strode out of the cabin.

Business that night was more brisk than usual. All the publicity Lucky had received in the news hadn't hurt and he and Andamo had a full night.

In the late hours of the morning, after the last of the customers had gone, Lucky and Andamo stood at the head of the gangway, watching their employees head for shore in the launch. Lucky turned away from the rail, went to his cabin with Andamo following.

The cabin was empty. Fan was gone.

"Oh, by the way," Andamo said innocently, "I forgot to tell you cause we were so rushed. She decided to leave. Said she couldn't wait, after all. I put her in one of the water-taxis."

Lucky looked at him. "Still trying to protect me?"

Andamo looked guilty. "You sore I didn't tell you?"

Lucky smiled, shook his head. He went to his desk and opened the drawer. The metal box was gone, of course.

From his pocket, Lucky took out the fourteen thousand dollars he'd slipped out of the metal box while locking it and slid up his sleeve without Fan noticing. It hadn't been a difficult feat for a fast-fingered gambler.

He gave the money to Andamo. "Put this in the safe for me, will you?"

Lucky left the cabin then and went out on deck. Smoking a cigarette against the rail, he gazed out across the moonlit water.

He was going to miss her, in spite of her shaky morals—or maybe partly because of them.

But if he judged the persistence and larceny of Fan correctly, it wouldn't end with her finding out the box she'd lifted was empty. She'd be back one of these days, trying again to take him. It was, somehow, a not unpleasant prospect to look forward to.

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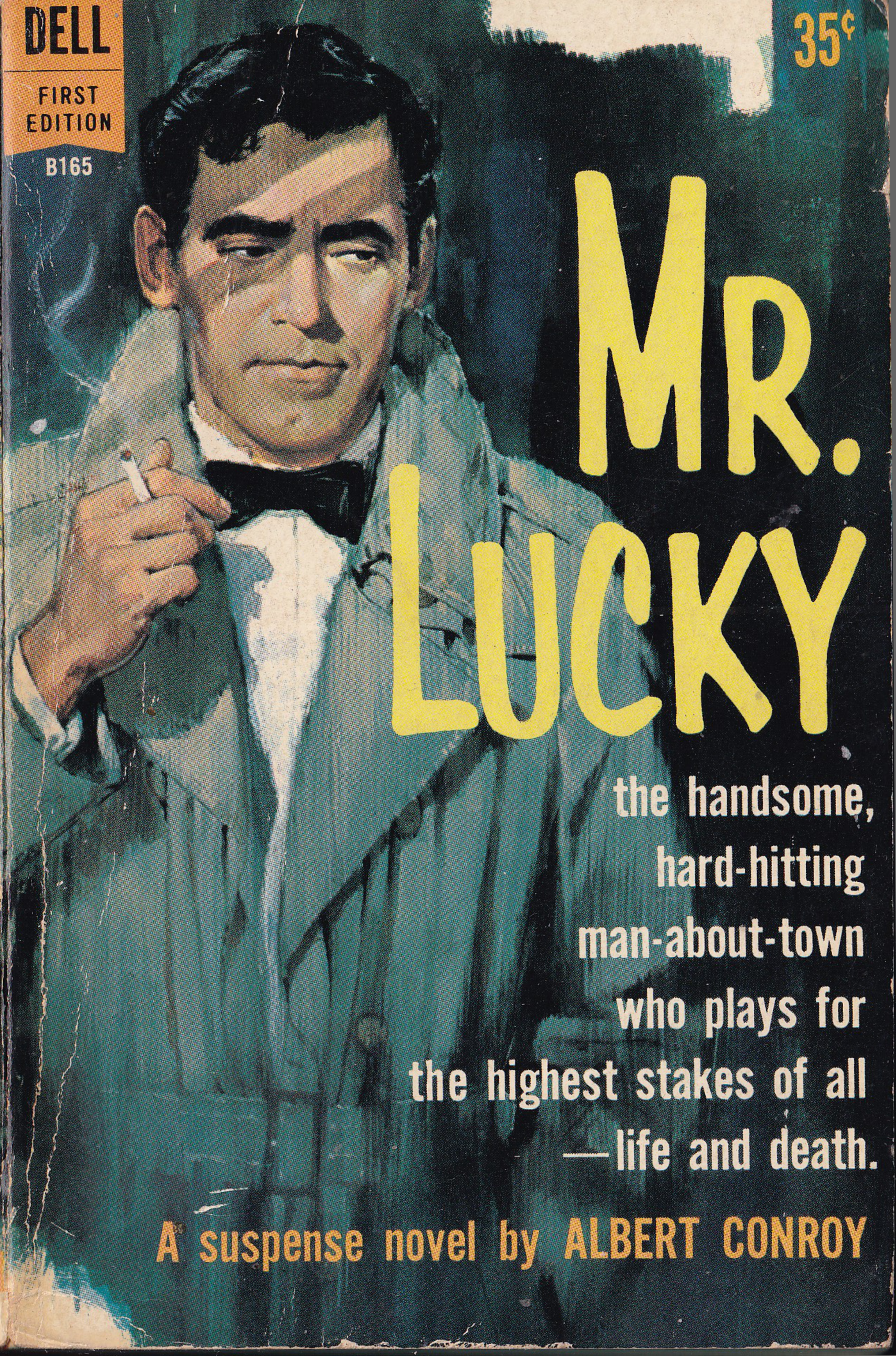

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